The New Criterion

May 1990

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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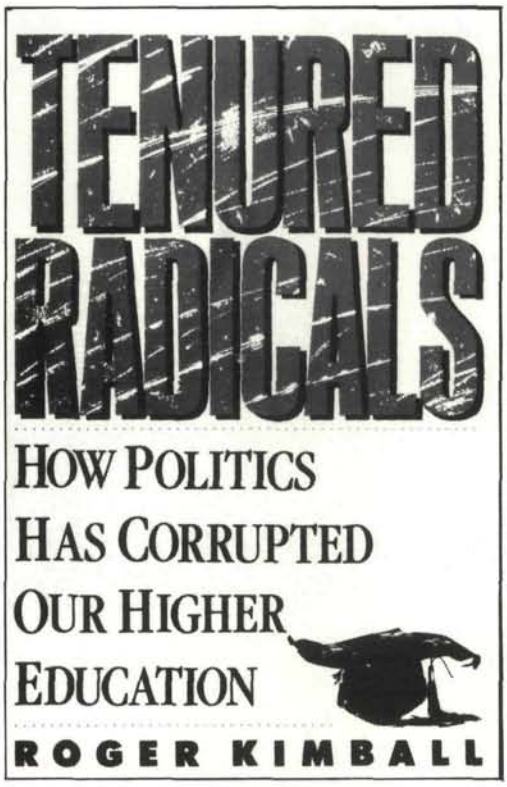

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The New Criterion *May 1990*

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W. S. Di Piero's collection of essays, *Memory and Enthusiasm,* has been published by Princeton.

Joseph Epstein's essays on literature are collected in *Plausible Prejudices* and *Partial Portraits* (Norton).

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Creighton Gilbert was a curator of the Savoldo exhibition currently on view in Brescia, Italy.

Rachel Hadas's most recent collection of poetry is *Pass It On* (Princeton).

Donald Lyons will be writing regularly on theater for *The New Criterion.*

Dana Mack wrote about James Levine and the Metropolitan Opera for our April issue.

Paul Mariani's latest book is *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman* (Morrow).

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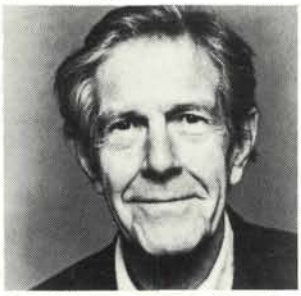
I-VI
John Cage



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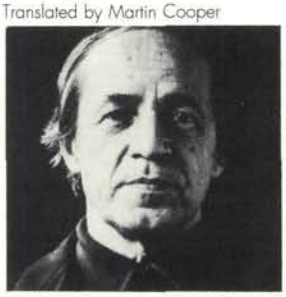

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Notes & Comments: May 1990

Looting the museums

The spectacular theft of paintings from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston earlier this spring—a haul that included the museum's prized Vermeer—has added a grievous criminal injury to the already painful—but, alas, apparently legal—blows that the art public has lately suffered at the hands of the museums themselves. Shocking and disgusting as the Boston theft unquestionably is, it is difficult not to see in it a parody of the kind of activity—the deaccessioning of museum-quality works of art from the so-called permanent collections of our museums—that has now become so commonplace in the museological profession itself.

The root cause of both the legal and the illegal versions of this activity is, of course, the same. Money. The insane prices fetched by certain works of art on the international art market has induced professional crooks and professional curators alike to look upon museum holdings as "assets" that may be profitably transferred into private hands.

From a strictly commercial point of view, the criminal version of this practice obviously has certain advantages for the buyer. It eliminates the middle men—the dealers and auction houses—and ensures privacy by avoiding the unwelcome publicity that nowadays is sure to accompany the acquisition of wildly overpriced art. There is even a tiny advantage for the public in these criminal transactions: it is spared the kind of canting curatorial apologias that are always given when the museums themselves engage in the (albeit legal) looting of their own collections. The net result for the public, however, whether the looting is legal or criminal, is the same: it is permanently denied access to works of art placed in the museums as a public trust. And while everyone understands that it is the public that has been robbed in the Gardner Museum crime, many people are still slow to grasp the extent to which the public is also robbed when our great museums hand over, with the consent of their boards and their staffs, important works of art to the dealers and the auction houses, and fully understand when they do so that these works will instantly—and in many cases, permanently—disappear from public view.

It is our impression that the runaway selling spree that our museums are now engaged in has not enhanced their reputation with the public. Far from it. It has damaged public confidence in the judgment of museum professionals, and induced a widespread feeling of cynicism about the way museums are run. It has cast grave doubts about the priorities that museums now set for themselves—and most particularly about the maniacal ambition to expand their existing

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facilities that has caused so many museums to exhaust their resources. The willingness—even the eagerness—of museums to part with high-quality works of art for whatever reason places every other policy and activity in these institutions under a cloud.

There is a lot about art museums today to cause distress to anyone who goes to them for aesthetic purposes. Their rampant commercialization has long been a scandal. Their noise levels are often intolerable. Those terrible tapes that the museum persuades ignorant visitors to clamp onto their heads and into their ears so that they can endure the ordeal of walking past great paintings without really looking at them are a noxious sound-distraction to serious viewers, and these canned lectures are not made more attractive by the oversize photo-portraits of grinning museum directors that are often displayed as part of the sales pitch. But in the past the serious viewer could at least count on the integrity of the permanent collections. Now that these are being dismantled and sold off at a faster rate than ever before, the experienced museumgoer is made to feel a new sense of despair about the whole enterprise. And this feeling—that the looters have been put in charge of the treasures they were hired to preserve and protect in the public interest—isn't going to be dissipated anytime soon. If the criminals who stole the paintings out of the Gardner Museum are ever caught, we can be reasonably confident that they will be put on trial and sent to jail. In regard to the legal looters who are now depleting our museum collections at an even greater rate, we have no reason to feel that justice will ever be done.

PBS: aping the networks

There is now an entire generation that has come of age with no memory of the time when public television was called "educational" television. We are rapidly approaching a moment when the term "non-commercial" will be equally inappropriate for what we see on public television. Today there is no shortage of commercials on public television. They aren't called commercials, of course, and their design is generally—though not invariably—more discreet, or at least less offensive, than the commercials seen on commercial television; but the proliferation of sponsor "spots"—some of them fairly elaborate in the number of products that are promoted in a very short time-segment—brings to the public-television screen more and more of what everyone recognizes to be plain old commercial advertising. In fact, if not in name, so-called non-commercial television is far more commercial than it was a generation ago. It is also less educational and more political.

The incursion of the commercial into "non-commercial" television might be considered less objectionable if it resulted either in a decreased use of public funds or in notable improvements in the quality of programming on public television, but there is no sign of either development taking place. Indeed, everything seems to be moving in the opposite direction. According to a recent report in *The Wall Street Journal*, what we can now expect from Jennifer Lawson, the new national programming chief for the Public Broadcasting Service, is the introduction of "game shows and situation comedies." Not surprisingly, these "non-commercial" clones of standard commercial-television packages are said to be "oriented to public service and increasing people's knowledge"—words that are no doubt meant for the ears of Congress, which next year will have to re-authorize the taxpayers' share (about 18 percent) of the public-television budget. But all the twaddle about "public service" and "knowledge" cannot disguise the fact that such changes in programming are designed—just as they always are in commercial television—to improve ratings. And only a mind nurtured on public television could believe that the drive to improve ratings has ever led to an improvement in quality.

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The truth is, the general intellectual level of what is seen on public television is abysmally low already. Except for the actual news segments on "The MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour," which are superior to most of what can be seen on network news programs, there is hardly any reason for intelligent people to watch the regular programming on public television at all. And even on the MacNeil/Lehrer program, all the talk plummets into the usual liberal bathos whenever it turns, as it often does, away from hard news to consider some cultural or social issue of current concern. The coverage of the arts on MacNeil/Lehrer is simply laughable—real criticism is invariably rejected in favor of upbeat, feel-good endorsements of whatever the trendy development of the moment happens to be—and the only thing to be said for those ghastly, maudlin "essays" by sundry caring, liberal sob-sisters of both sexes is that they come at the very end of the hour and are thus easily switched off.

The situation is no different with what is often claimed to be the jewel of public television—"Masterpiece Theatre." What had begun as a remarkably successful series of dramatizations of great novels—the unforgettable version of Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* was probably the finest thing of its kind ever shown on television—long ago degenerated into little more than soap opera with a British accent. The cause of this change is hardly mysterious. Something more popular, which is to say something on a lower level, was wanted, and the people in charge of programming were no doubt confident that so long as they could continue to wheel on the cultivated presence of Alistair Cooke to lend some intellectual gloss to these soaps there would be no complaints.

Now, with the promise of game shows and sitcoms on public television, the aping of the commercial networks by PBS can be expected to take a quantum leap. Sooner or later the question will have to be faced: Who needs this stuff? If public television is now obliged to imitate more and more elements of commercial television to keep its audience from disappearing, isn't it time to reconsider the whole role of public television itself?

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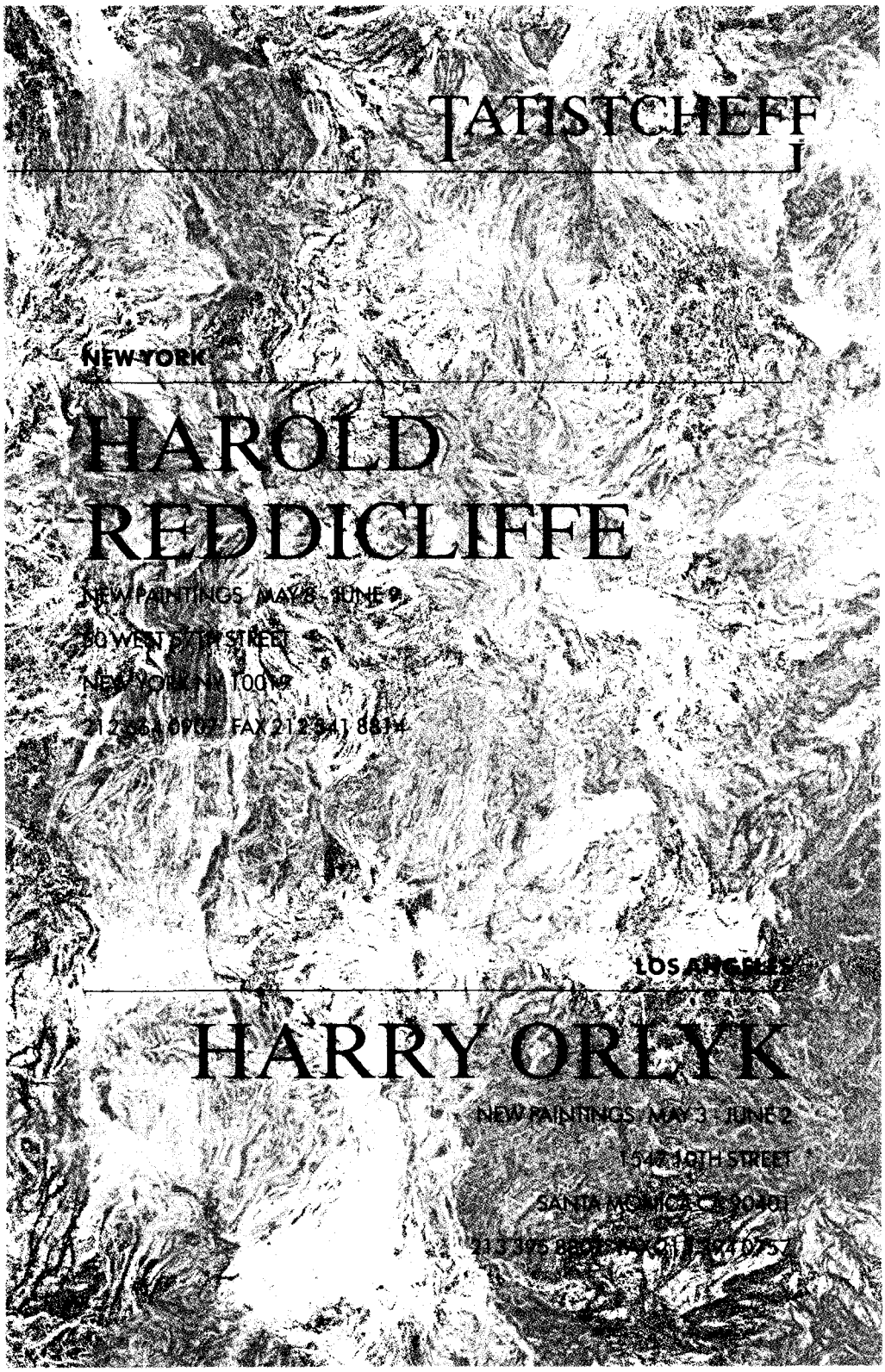

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John Szarkowski's "history of photographic pictures"

by Hilton Kramer

A picture has been said to be something between a thing and a thought.
—Samuel Palmer

Of the many things to be noted about the book and the exhibition that John Szarkowski has produced for the Museum of Modern Art under the title *Photography Until Now*, the first is this: the book is without doubt one of the best ever written on its subject, which is the history of photography, and the exhibition is one of the most beautiful that the museum has devoted to the medium.[1] Neither is without significant flaws, to be sure, but given the scale of Mr. Szarkowski's project—which encompasses the prehistory of photographic thought, going back to Leonardo, as well as a century and a half of actual photographic production—such flaws as it has are not, for the most part, unduly disfiguring.

At least this is true as far as the historical material is concerned. When it comes to the contemporary pictures, however, the exhibition goes into something of a nose dive. While certain reasons for this conspicuous drop in aesthetic quality can be adduced from the way Mr. Szarkowski treats this period in his book—he speaks, for example, of a sense of "a diminished role for photography, even a kind of disenfranchisement"—what it comes down to, I think, is the same pattern of decline that has lately been discernible elsewhere in the visual arts.

That we are now in a fallow period in the visual arts, if not indeed a period of decadence, is not something that the curatorial mind can generally be expected to acknowledge. Yet Mr. Szarkowski comes remarkably close to doing just this when, in the concluding chapter of his book, he says of contemporary photographers that "As with poets and composers, the relationship between their work and their lives has become casual and improvisatory"; and further, that the time has now passed when photographers could really believe that "they had a privileged access to truth and thus to power." Beside such doleful pronouncements, the claim that "a score or more of photographers are now doing work of vitality and original beauty, under conditions that do not seem propitious" sounds a little hollow, and the exhibition doesn't do much to support the claim, either.

It is, in any case, for its splendid account of what Mr. Szarkowski calls the "history of photographic pictures," rather than for its inventory or assessment of current accomplishment, that *Photography Until Now* commands our admiration. Yet it is important to make a distinction here between the book and the exhibition. About the book, Mr.

1 The exhibition, after its current showing at the Museum of Modern Art (February 14-May 29), will be shown at the Cleveland Museum of Art (June 27-August 19). The book, *Photography Until Now*, is published by the Museum of Modern Art/Bulfinch Press-Little, Brown (343 pages, $60; $29.95 paper).

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Szarkowski writes that he has "attempted . . . to sketch out a history of photographic pictures, organized according to patterns of technological change." This interpretation of technological change is broad enough to encompass, as he notes, "not only . . . the chemical and optical issues often thought of as constituting photographic craft, but . . . methods of distribution of photographic imagery, economic constraints, and professional structures."

What this means, in effect, is that Mr. Szarkowski has written a social history of photography, and—in my view—a very good one. The exhibition, on the other hand, although divided into sections that conform to the organization of this social history, is more the work of a connoisseur of photographic art than of a social historian. This accounts for the remarkably high level of quality that is sustained throughout most of the historical sections of the exhibition. Where this high level collapses into something else, we can usually feel the intervention of the social historian who cannot resist the temptation to document a development that, whatever its other claims to our attention, is devoid of aesthetic interest. It is only in the interest of social history, for instance, that items such as a population chart from a New York newspaper in the year 1900 or a layout devoted to Mussolini in a 1934 issue of the London *Weekly Illustrated* have found their way into the company of so many photographic masterpieces.

It is, moreover, the connoisseur rather than the social historian who is responsible for the brilliant installation of the exhibition. Mr. Szarkowski has always had a keen sense of what might be called the dramaturgy of a large photographic exhibition, which in the wrong hands—and with the wrong eyes—can so rapidly degenerate into either an exercise in tedium or a riot of showy effects. In this exhibition, he is very adroit at striking a balance between familiar and unfamiliar pictures in a way that illuminates both. He is very good at rhyming pictures that belong together and, where needed, coming up with striking juxtapositions that refresh the eye, foil expectation, and offer instruction as well as pleasure. Mercifully, there is no tendency here to treat the installation as, primarily, a problem in layout design, and thus to treat pictures as mere visual counters in some larger design strategy. In most cases, the exact pictorial weight of a photograph is carefully calculated and given the space and the company that are appropriate to its character and its scale.

Again, this connoisseur's delicacy (if one may call it that) tends to break down in the contemporary section of the exhibition, but there it is often a case of trying to make bricks without the requisite straw. Pictures such as Robert Rauschenberg's, Andy Warhol's, and Cindy Sherman's are so fraudulent and crass in the use they make of the photographic medium that their sheer vulgarity is bound to capsize whatever company they are made to keep. The historical part of the show is not without its own episodes of misplaced emphasis—Mr. Szarkowski seems, for example, to have acquired a sweet tooth for anonymous pictures of early industrial plants that cannot always be justified by the photographic results—but by and large, it is his connoisseur's eye that remains in control. It was certainly the connoisseur's eye, by the way, that elected to omit Robert Mapplethorpe from this exhibition—a decision that renders a more salutary and unanswerable judgment on the whole Mapplethorpe controversy than any other I know about.

When we turn to the book Mr. Szarkowski has written to accompany this exhibition, we find it is the social historian who is mainly in command, with the connoisseur usually playing a more ancillary role. About the role of early photography in politics and in the lives of the lower classes, for example, Mr. Szarkowski has some interesting things to say. Writing about Mathew Brady's 1860 portrait of Abraham Lincoln, he tells us that Lincoln is thought to have considered the popularity of this picture, which was printed in huge numbers, one of the reasons for his

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election. "The frontier lawyer," Mr. Szarkowski writes, "who was said to look 'half-alligator and half-horse' looks in Brady's portrait rather more like Gregory Peck. It is not known how many of Brady's portraits of Lincoln were sold in carte-de-visite form, but the one made by Alexander Hesler the following June was said to have sold more than 100,000 copies."

He reminds us that the daguerreotype, on the other hand, "found its special function in making pictures for the smallest and most private of audiences—the families of uncelebrated men and women. Daguerreotypists made portraits of millions of people who were unknown beyond their own village, people whose forebears had never before been portrayed as individuals . . . . It is poetically just that the daguerreotype belongs to the century that saw in Western countries a radical expansion of suffrage. After Daguerre the yeoman, and then the peasant and the proletarian, would also have visible ancestors and family histories."

In Mr. Szarkowski's account of the nineteenth-century interest in photographing ruins, however, the social historian is joined by the connoisseur of pictorial aesthetics in defining a major genre of early photography. "Of all the surprises that might persuade one to postpone one's journey," he writes, "a ruin was the delight that came most naturally to Talbot's mind." William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) was, of course, one of the inventors of photography. Mr. Szarkowski continues:

> In this taste [Talbot] was altogether representative of the educated classes of his time and place. Ruins were revered both for their meaning and their aspect: both as documents to be read for what they told of the medieval or ancient past, and as embodiments of the picturesque, a word that resists precise definition, but that expressed a taste for the used above the new, the irregular over the geometric, the rough rather than the smooth. The ruin was a central icon to the Romantic imagination, and if, by 1850, the idea had been well worked over by painting and poetry, photography brought to it a new specificity and conviction. And the calotype, which itself tended toward the rough and irregular, and did not look too insistently new, was an excellent tool for the issue at hand.

About many subjects, indeed, Mr. Szarkowski writes with a critical clarity that is admirably unclouded by nostalgia. His judgment of the way photography was used—and misused—in *Life* magazine properly explodes one of the abiding myths of photographic history:

> In 1972 *Life* closed its doors; many of the other magazines that had supported photojournalists had already done so, or would shortly. The reason usually given for their failure is the rise of television . . . . But one might say that the magazines had failed on creative grounds before television became a competitor, and that if they had succeeded on those grounds they might also have survived. It is difficult to identify a photo essay from the best days of the experiment in which consistently superior photographs and rigorous writing augment and transform each other, to achieve that new means of expression to which editors, photographers, writers, and art directors paid continual lip service.

What is also a major part of this story, which Mr. Szarkowski does not go into, is the politics of photojournalism in its heyday. The most celebrated photojournalists of the Thirties and Forties belonged to the Left, whereas the proprietors of the mass-circulation magazines they worked for were generally on the Right; and this meant that an ideological civil war was endemic to the entire enterprise. I frankly doubt that the history of photojournalism can be entirely understood in isolation from this political conflict.

There is much more to *Photography Until Now* than can be described here, of course. And, it is also important to take note, it is a major event in John Szarkowski's own career. Mr. Szarkowski has been the direc-

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tor of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art since 1962, and in *Photography Until Now*—both the book and the exhibition—he has given us both a summary of his thought in this field and a quite specific sense of what he believes the canon (dare one use the word?) of great photography to consist of. There is no one better equipped to essay these tasks than he, and his achievement in *Photography Until Now* will itself stand as a landmark in the intellectual history of photography.

That it is an achievement attended by a certain air of melancholy is itself a reflection of the situation in which photography now finds itself. With his customary candor Mr. Szarkowski takes note of the degree to which photography has lately taken refuge in the academy and in the art world in the interest of survival, and while he doesn't offer any assessment of what losses this shift has entailed for photography—losses in quality and in expressive power as well as fundamental purpose—he shows himself to be keenly aware of them. It was certainly bad luck for photography that it attached itself to the academy at the very moment when the academy was itself suffering a calamitous crisis of confidence in its own purposes, and it was a similar misfortune for photography to become so dependent on the art world at a moment when its standards, too, were in a tailspin. But perhaps this is just another way of saying that photography is now, for better or for worse—usually worse, I'm afraid—so much a part of the crisis that the institutions of our cultural life are passing through that it has virtually ceased to have an identity or a destiny of its own. If this is indeed the case, then *Photography Until Now* may serve to remind us of what this field of achievement consisted of in the halcyon years of its development.

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The Pasternak centennial celebrations

by William Jay Smith

Attending the Bolshoi Theatre on Sverdlov Square in Moscow is always an exciting prospect. Once the Great Imperial Theatre, built in 1824 with a statue of Phoebus in his sun chariot above its ionic portico, it promises always a wealth of music and dance in its red and gold interior. One enters the building as if stepping into the scene on a hand-painted Palekh box, ready to be part of some Russian fairy tale. Its gilded décor was completely refurbished a few years ago and its heavy red curtains rewoven; it is only on close inspection that one discovers stitched into the rich fabric the hammer-and-sickle emblem and is reminded of the real world beyond these brilliant walls. I went to the Bolshoi first in 1970 and returned a number of times since; but never have I witnessed an audience more animated than that assembled on Friday, February 9, for a special program honoring the hundredth birthday of Boris Pasternak. That such a program with an invited audience of writers, scholars, journalists, and political leaders from all over the world could take place some thirty years after Boris Pasternak had been forced to renounce the Nobel Prize and had been hounded to death by a repressive government seemed truly miraculous.

The curtain went up on great church bells ringing overhead and a folk ensemble singing in a Russian village. At the conclusion of the folk song, the poet Andrei Voznesensky, the protégé of Pasternak who, as Chairman of the Pasternak Commission, had been largely responsible for arranging this evening, came forward with a few words of Pasternak's and a few words about him. Before speaking, he lit a candle in one of the ornate candelabra on one side of the stage. The other speakers and performers, as each came on to honor the poet, would follow suit until candles were lit the full length of the stage. The poet's words were followed by two piano pieces by Scriabin, reminding us that Pasternak, who studied with Scriabin, had first wanted to become a composer.

Then came a Chopin prelude choreographed by Fokine and danced by Bessmertnova of the Bolshoi Ballet Company. Her solo gave way to a scene from the ballet *Ivan the Terrible*, during which the stage became an intricate maze of whips savagely wielded by an impressive group of male dances, their forceful performance a visual metaphor of the repressive years that Pasternak lived through in the Fifties. Next, reproductions of famous religious paintings were projected while Pasternak's religious lyrics were sung. (Born into a non-observant Jewish family, Pasternak had become a fervent Christian; he claimed to have been taken to be baptized by his nanny.) Part IV of Mozart's *Requiem* was sung by the Moscow Sveshnikov School Boys' Choir, about a hundred singers in all taking up the entire stage. Then Georgian lyrics were sung by the Georgian Sotkilava (Pasternak was revered in Georgia for his translations of the Georgian poets who had suffered and died under Stalin).

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Interspersed among these numbers were selections from Pasternak's poetry read by the celebrated Leningrad actor Innokentii Smoktunovsky and Moscow actor and director Nikolai Gubenko, who is now the Minister of Culture. At the same time were projected photographs of Pasternak at various stages of his life, with his long thin equine face that had prompted Tsvetayeva to say that Pasternak resembled both the Arab and the Arab's steed, and his great dark hypnotic Oriental eyes staring out. While more of Pasternak's lyrics were sung by the State Radio and Television Committee Academic Choir and the Sveshnikov School Boys' Choir, on a scrim the outline of Pasternak's dacha in the writers' colony at Peredelkino was projected like the prow of a ship through a heavy snow storm. And then while more photographs showed the poet being lowered into his grave in the cemetery opposite his house, the lamp hanging in the dacha continued to burn, the snow continued to fall, and the candles on stage were extinguished one by one.

When the music stopped and the curtain came down, there was a sudden gasp of awe from the audience at such a splendid assembly of talent. It was as if every cultural facet of this vast country had been brought to bear in a dazzling array to light up the achievement of one of its great poets. It was strangely ironic that in a country that was gradually renouncing the state's complete control of the arts, this evening, never to be repeated, could not have taken place without that governmental control.

In the audience that evening were both Yakovlev and Ligachev, the most liberal and conservative members of the Politburo, and people gathered around them after the performance. Also present was Raisa Gorbacheva, who was heard to remark afterwards, "What a magnificent evening, but what a sad funeral!"

The next day's celebration centered around the opening of the museum in Pasternak's dacha and a visit in Peredelkino, the writers' colony some eighteen kilometers south of Moscow, where the poet had spent the last years of his life and where he had written *Dr. Zhivago*. The Church of the Transfiguration, across a little valley from his dacha, was already packed when the buses of foreign visitors arrived. It had recently snowed but the muddy roads had been cleared and militia men were everywhere to assist the visitors. After a long wait in a reverent candle-lit silence, the poet Yevgeni Yevtushenko, towering above the others, gave the signal that the service had concluded and that we should all make our way to Pasternak's grave. That was easier said than done. The graves in the Peredelkino cemetery are almost all surrounded by iron fences, and we had to follow a zigzag path around them. Another crowd had already gathered at the grave, and it was impossible to get anywhere near it. Finally, out of the crowd the Orthodox priest, in his white and gold vestments and his golden crown, made his way through the crowd that continued to press in. Again Yevtushenko's head rose above the others: we could hear him loudly praising the poet as we made our way around the grill work of the graves back to the road.

The graveyard at Peredelkino is filled to capacity; no space remains for anyone else to be buried there. A few new graves have been dug down toward the river but they will be the last. Almost every grave is enclosed in iron railings painted black, green, or blue. These railings at times turn the individual plots into what seem to be private gardens with beds of flowers and occasionally small wooden benches off to the side. I thought of a visit I had made a few years ago to Pasternak's grave. The poet is buried in a fairly large plot, surrounded by a low railing with a little hedge of rose bushes enclosing it. Just outside the plot is a simple dark stone, marking the burial place of Pasternak's first wife. On Pasternak's grave is a simple straight white stone, somewhat larger, it seems, at the top, on which the poet's head had been carved in relief. Or, rather, the artist had planned to carve the head, but the impression or indentation of the stone appeared so spectacular that it had been left

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just as it was since it catches so well the expression on Pasternak's face. On the day I saw it, after a recent snowfall, a faded plastic pink rose was hanging just over the indentation. The snow around the grave had been trampled by the many visitors who had left their offerings behind—a few red carnations, branches of evergreen, and there in the middle, the most striking offering of all, a frozen orange. (Oranges at that time were almost unobtainable anywhere in Moscow.) Above Pasternak's head on the tombstone someone had added a small cross in the soft stone.

Now climbing back up the hill beyond the little river toward the house that would become a museum, I thought of Pasternak's line, "To live one's life is not like crossing a field." He had crossed the field now forever in death, and everything today had been arranged to pay him tribute.

When I saw his house a few years ago, it was in a state of total disrepair. Now the windows were shining and clear, the clapboards had been redone and painted a dark brown. The interior, which I had seen sadly framed by the stalks of the great geraniums that had grown up to the ceiling, was now unrecognizable in its pristine effulgence. The sketches, drawings, and pastels of the poet's father, Leonid Pasternak, were still there but they now hung on a freshly painted wall above a newly stained parquet floor. On a table in the room upstairs were spread out manuscript pages of *Dr. Zhivago* written in a dark blue pen with Pasternak's many corrections superimposed in a pale violet ink. The visitors milled about inside and out; when finally a microphone was installed on the back porch and the official opening ceremony began, many people were caught inside while others were trapped in the deep snow unable to move during the long series of speeches introduced by Voznesensky, who broke a bottle of champagne on the edge of the house. Among the speakers were Pasternak's son and biographer Yevgeni, a physicist who ten years ago gave up his profession to devote himself wholly to working for the establishment of this museum, and Natalia Pasternak, the widow of Pasternak's younger son, Leonid, and the museum's curator. Inge Feltrinelli, the widow of the Italian publisher who first brought out *Dr. Zhivago*, spoke of her husband's correspondence with Pasternak, which she is donating to the museum. Arthur Miller reminded the audience that if Germany had been victorious, Pasternak might have met his death not only as a dissident writer but as a Jew.

In a letter written in 1958 to Jacqueline de Proyart, Professor of Russian at the University of Poitiers, Pasternak gave a list of the *dramatis personae* in his life. They were, he wrote, "God, woman, nature, work, death . . . . These are the really close partners, friends, and companions. Everything of significance is limited to these." The centennial celebrations had thus far paid attention to all of them but one, which was woman. Scarcely any mention had been made of Olga Ivinskaya, who had inspired the figure of Lara, the heroine of his novel and who after his death had been sentenced to eight years' imprisonment and her daughter Irina to three years. The absence of Mrs. Ivinskaya, who is living today in Moscow and who has written at length in *A Captive of Time* (1978) of her involvement with the poet, was particularly evident in Peredelkino. Although Pasternak never left his wife and continued to write in what he called "the big house," the greater part of the last years of his life was spent in the smaller houses that Mrs. Ivinskaya rented in the writers' colony. Not only was she the inspiration of his novel but she had also typed it and had acted as his agent and had managed his literary affairs completely toward the end of his life. We were told that Lydia Chukovskaya on the planning commission had made it clear that the Pasternak family would not take part if Olga Ivinskaya were present. But, as with so much surrounding Pasternak, her absence added a bitter note of irony to the proceedings.

The round-table discussion at the Writers' Club the next day opened with remarks by Gunnel Valmkvist of the Swedish Academy.

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A Roman Catholic essayist and translator of Marcel Proust, Mrs. Valmkvist said how pleased the Swedish Academy had been finally to award Yevgeni Pasternak his father's diploma and medal at a reception in Stockholm on December 10 last year and thus to recognize again officially Pasternak's great contribution to literature. (Yevgeni Pasternak, in accepting, had told the Academy and the winners of last year's prizes that the occasion was for him a day both happy and tragic: happy because justice had finally been done to his father, but tragic because he was receiving the medal but not the money.) Following Mrs. Valmkvist, Vittorio Strada, who in 1958 passed on to Feltrinelli Pasternak's permission to publish *Dr. Zhivago*, referred to Pasternak and Akhmatova as the last poets in the great classical cycle whose work had elevated Russian poetry to a new level. Aleksandr Kushner, the Leningrad poet, set the tone when he called Pasternak a poet reminiscent of Fet, whose poetry, no matter how dark or solemn it sometimes became, was always a celebration of life.

Many participants, especially the French who had been close in touch with Pasternak in his last years, were unhappy with the opening Bolshoi presentation. To them it had paid too little attention to the years of persecution during which Pasternak wrote with what Edmund Wilson called "the courage of genius," allowing him to produce *Dr. Zhivago* under so severe a totalitarian regime. Jacqueline de Proyart spoke of the fear rising *in crescendo* in the soon-to-be-published twenty-two letters and nine postcards that she had received from Pasternak form 1957 to 1960. And Michel Oucouturier quoted Pasternak as saying on one occasion that the time had come "to write not with one's hands but with one's feet," meaning that poetry was to be composed through action. Yet it was amazing how many speakers like Georges Nivat, who had been prevented by the authorities from marrying Mrs. Ivinskaya's daughter Irina, stressed the fact that in a life so clouded by tragedy Pasternak had until the very end found joy in living. Naum Khorzhavin, the émigré Russian poet now living in Boston, called Pasternak "a poet of happiness who defended life from villainy all over the world."

The round-table speeches ranged from the brilliance of the Russian émigré scholar Lazar Fleishman's discussion of Pasternak and post-Revolutionary Futurism to the complete nonsense of Moon Dok Su of South Korea, who spent most of the time inviting the delegates to the Twelfth International Congress of Poetry, of which he is chairman and which is to take place next August in Seoul. Moon Dok Su said that he personally had never read Pasternak, but that Russian was studied in the universities of South Korea. His statement called to mind the many letters that appeared in newspapers throughout the Soviet Union at the time of the poet's persecution, almost all of them beginning, "I have not read Pasternak, but . . . ."

The concluding event was an evening in the Great Hall of the Writers' Club, during which Voznesensky, Yevtushenko, Akhmadulina, and other poets read from their work and musicians played. Although it added little to one's knowledge or appreciation of Pasternak, it was a warm, intimate, and memorable occasion.

Pasternak had little faith in any political "thaw" in his own time because too often he saw how freezing weather could come again or how the ground underfoot could be turned into impassable mud. In lines translated by Max Hayward he had said,

> The roads have turned to mire
> And I make my way along the verge
> Churning slush and clay like dough
> I plod through liquid sludge.

Certainly in the last decade there has been a thaw unthinkable in his time. During the week of these centennial celebrations, which were in themselves ample testimony to such a thaw, the Communist Party had voted to relinquish its position as the sole political

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party in the country. In the same week, Mstislav Rostropovich, who had been stripped of his citizenship for defending Solzhenitsyn, had been invited back to play; he and his wife were guests of the American ambassador. Books that had been banned for years were being printed, and there seemed to be no end to the freedom to speak one's mind. But was the ground underfoot turning into the proverbial impassable mud and would the country ever be able to extricate itself? Daily life was far more difficult than it had been two years before: there were fewer consumer goods on the shelves and the lines before the stores and the liquor shops (the restrictions on the sale of vodka, which had not worked, had been eased) were longer than ever. Few of the privately owned cooperatives were succeeding because of the restrictions and taxes placed upon them, and if they did succeed, they were bitterly resented by many people who thought the owners were members of a mafia enriching themselves illegally at the expense of others.

The only market that seemed to flourish was the black market, which was now so open as to be shocking. Taxis now seldom stopped unless hailed by packages of Marlboros or Kents held high in the air. Their drivers, demanding to be paid in hard currency, offered to change money or to sell for bargain prices the black caviar available only in the hard-currency Beriozkas. Moscow was becoming a dangerous city; crime was rampant. "Rape, robbery—you name it, we have it," a friend of mine explained. Was there any way out for a people who had already suffered so much? These Pasternak celebrations, so brilliantly organized in so short a time by Andrei Voznesensky and the members of his commission, demonstrated the healthful impact of Russia's intelligentsia. But would *perestroika* ever take hold? Was the drive toward democracy irreversible in a country on the verge of civil war?

Along with the Swedish delegation, several of we Americans were put up at the Octyabriska, the hotel named for the October revolution, which until recently had been the sole domain of the Central Committee and now appeared to be turned over to foreign businessmen. The rooms, more luxurious than any others in Moscow, were evidence of why many party officials were being condemned for their special privileges. My suite had a living room, a bedroom, two well-appointed bathrooms, a refrigerator, a television, a sofa, armchairs, a desk, a complete set of china and glassware. The food in the dining room was excellent and readily available. It was not necessary, as it is in most tourist hotels, to be part of a group to be served, and the waiters were obliging and efficient. This was now a hotel designed for the Western tourist, right down to the paper bands that the maids every morning slipped over the toilet seats, on which in bold letters was printed the word DISINFEKTED, the "K" seeming to strengthen the scientific aspect of the disinfection.

And yet it was still in many ways the fortress of the privileged. Like the graves in Peredelkino, it was surrounded by an iron fence, a high one with sharp pointed pickets and with a huge electrically operated gate and a guard to check the credentials of every visitor. The hotel's guests had to be served by official government limousines or buses since taxis could enter the gates only with difficulty. If the rooms were not actually bugged, the listening equipment was surely still in place. So much, yet so little, seemed to have changed. At the top of the vast white marble lobby was a white marble statue of Lenin with potted flowers at its base. I came in once late at night, my eyes a black-and-white blur from the winter world outside, to find an old crone in her drab dustcoat mopping up, dragging slowly across the dazzling floor a huge filthy floor-cloth as if it were all of Asia. How often I had seen that same figure over the past twenty years! She seemed to symbolize this suffering country, so fixed in its past and yet dreaming constantly of breaking out of its walled fortress, a country where great poets like Pasternak, who had spoken for individual liberty, had been revered but where so often they had been hounded to their graves.

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The big O: the reputation of George Orwell

by Joseph Epstein

Six years after the heavily over-Orwelled if otherwise unfateful year of 1984, and fully forty years since his death in 1950, one still feels that nothing like a clear picture of the precise quality of George Orwell has yet to emerge. Fame—a great, billowy, international cloud of fame—has got in the way. Ozone-like layers of controversy, chiefly having to do with conservative and left-wing claimants to Orwell's political legacy, have further obscured the atmosphere. The highly uneven nature of Orwell's writing has sent up yet more in the way of mist. Q. D. Leavis, for example, who early praised Orwell's essays and criticism, asked that he write no more fiction. Then there is Orwell's life, which from one standpoint appears so seamless, an unblemished sheet of uninterrupted goodness, and then from another makes him appear a cold and rather tasteless fish indeed, whose first wife felt that her husband's work came before her and in fact before everything else in life and who died during an operation for an illness—presumably cancer—he scarcely knew about.

Fame of the kind enjoyed by performing artists, politicians, and other public figures is rarely available to writers and creative artists generally. Whenever he was in danger of thinking himself famous, Virgil Thomson used to say, he had only to go out into the world to disabuse himself of the notion. Soon after the burial of Balzac, a writer always keenly interested in fame, the bookkeepers at the Père-Lachaise Cemetery sent their bill for services to the family of "M. Balsaque." Surely there must be a lesson here somewhere.

George Orwell's fame—which has been largely a posthumous phenomenon—has been not only extraordinary but across the board: popular, academic, intellectual. What put Orwell on, in fact all over, the map were his two international best-sellers, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949). These books have been translated into more than thirty languages and have by now sold scores of millions of copies. In the English-speaking world, they are nearly unavoidable; for some years now students generally encounter *Animal Farm* in junior high school or its equivalent and *Nineteen Eighty-four* in secondary school and are frequently asked to read an Orwell essay or two in university composition courses: "A Hanging" (1931) or "Shooting an Elephant" (1936), perhaps, or "Politics and the English Language" or "Why I Write" (both 1946). Among schoolchildren nowadays, the name George Orwell may be better known than William Shakespeare.

Unfortunately for Danielle Steel and Euclid, it is neither number of books sold nor number of children forced to read an author that confers upon him true literary fame. Instead it is the currency of his ideas that matters. Here Orwell has scored, and scored heavily. "Orwellian" has clearly left "Kafkaesque," "Chekhovian," and other

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literary eponyms far behind. Partly, of course, this is owing to recent decades having been—if you will allow the expression—highly Orwellian. But partly it has to do with the stark clarity of Orwell's ideas, or at least the chief ideas of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-four*. So much is this less so in Orwell's other writings—his essays and nonfictional books—despite the lucidity of each discrete work, that the question of whether Orwell was finally a man of the Left or not will probably never be entirely settled.

Between the "finer grain" and the "broader outline" writers, Orwell was surely among the latter—among, that is, those writers whose work can be reduced to its essential ideas, as the work of Henry James, Marcel Proust, and George Santayana cannot. So much have the ideas extracted from Orwell's writing been in the air that one needs scarcely to have read him to have a strong notion of what these ideas are. Just as one need not have read through Marx to be aware of the class struggle and economic determinism, or have read much of Freud to know about the Oedipus complex and the importance of dreams, slips, and early sexuality, so one does not really have to have turned a page of Orwell to know that "some pigs are more equal than others," that "Power is Knowledge," and that Big Brother (the creep) is watching you.

In personal testimony to this fact, I can report that, toward the end of 1984, the year of the great Orwell glut, I was asked to add to the slag heap by giving a little talk on *Nineteen Eighty-four*, which I glumly agreed to do. It was only when I sat down to prepare this talk that I realized that I had never read *Nineteen Eighty-four*. I had seen the American movie version, with the impressively sweaty-faced Edmund O'Brien playing Winston Smith; I had for years heard bandied about—no doubt bandied about myself—such terms as "newspeak" and "doublethink"; I had read a number of essays on the novel; but as for actually having read the novel itself, nope, I couldn't rightly say I that I had. When I did get around to reading it, I found it rather disappointing; like most of Orwell's fiction, it was thin on detail and the working-out of the plot seemed unconvincing. As a dystopian novel, I thought it less prescient than Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932); as a specifically Cold War novel, it couldn't lay a glove on Arthur Koestler's masterpiece, *Darkness at Noon* (1940). But the more interesting point is that, such has been the fame of *Nineteen Eighty-four*, one not only can come to believe one has read the novel when one hasn't but, more amazing still, such has been the spread of the novel through the general culture, it may well be that one doesn't really have to have read the novel at all, so long as one doesn't agree to go about giving talks on it.

Not only does Orwell's fame spread wide and cut deep, but there has become, somehow, something sacrosanct about him and his works. This, too, is a posthumous phenomenon. While he lived, Orwell had more than the normal allotment of enemies. Chief among them were political intellectuals, and in the 1930s, when Orwell came to literary maturity, to be intellectual was by definition to be political. One of Orwell's specialties was attacking intellectuals, and especially catching them out at disseminating left-wing cant, upon which he, Orwell, loved to stomp. ("All left-wing parties in the highly industrialized countries are at bottom a sham," he wrote in his essay "Rudyard Kipling" [1942], "because they make it their business to fight against something which they do not really wish to destroy.") Orwell was much better at influencing people than at making friends, at least when alive. Now the situation appears nearly to be reversed. Excepting only the most artery-hardened Marxists and academic feminists, everyone is Orwell's friend nowadays. Devotion to Orwell has become no laughing matter. Or so I conclude from the fact that, after all these years, no one so far as I know has published a parody of Orwell—an easy enough job, one would think, given the many strongly characteristic tics and turns of Orwell's readily recognized prose style, with its aggressively commonsensical

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spin. It is easy to imagine what Orwell might have thought of the Orwell phenomenon:

> As I write, this room is rapidly filling up with the stench of smelly little orthodoxies, and they are all about me. Every neo-con, lib-lab, beard-bearing student-humping academic, every *Nation* reader, language snob, think-tank barnacle, priest, admiral, Harvard child-psychologist, CEO is aware that I am high on the list of entirely O.K. writers. "Orwell" has become one of those magic words, like "Art"; say it and everything is fine. You have only to quote me and your case is made. The grandchildren of people who fifty or sixty years ago would have been pleased to wipe their boots on me are now forced to read me in paperback. It's no use pretending that the sheer power of my writing has brought this about, or that such a diversity of admirers have all come round to my general views. The last man you want to trust is the man whom everyone thinks is admirable. "Saints," I once wrote, "should always be judged guilty until they are proven innocent." The same holds true for writers, except that, as any writer worth his salt will tell you, no good writer is ever innocent.

In one of those complex, less-than-straightforward letters of rejection that publisher's editors frequently find themselves writing to authors, T. S. Eliot, after rejecting *Animal Farm* on behalf of the firm of Faber & Faber, wrote to Orwell that he regretted the rejection and that "I have a regard for your work, because it is good writing of fundamental integrity." My guess is that Orwell would have had no difficulty accepting that as a fair description of the quality of his writing. It strikes me as dead on target: "good writing of fundamental integrity." Nowhere did Orwell suggest that he thought himself a writer for the ages, a universal genius, a figure of the kind that, posthumously and through the vagaries of circumstance, he has become: translated into all languages, required reading for schoolchildren, quoted approvingly by natural enemies.

How intricate and never quite arbitrary a thing is reputation in literature! In one instance it can be aided immensely by early death (James Agee), in another by longevity (Robert Penn Warren). Unpopular politics have crushed a writer's reputation (Wyndham Lewis), while careful radicalism can elevate another writer's reputation (Robert Lowell). Some writers appear to have gained as greatly by withdrawing from the scene (Thomas Pynchon) as others have by clever self-promotion (Truman Capote). Reading the recent obituaries for Mary McCarthy, one of the more famous serious writers of our day, it occurred to me that Miss McCarthy's fame had always depended upon her being alive to reinforce it. Her early rise in reputation depended in part on her youthful good looks, no matter how clever she was as a critic. In the fiction of her early and middle years, she sustained her reputation by her continuing ability to outrage through gossip and scandal. In her later years, a doyenne now, it was her being outraged that people tended to be concerned about, for she could be enormously disapproving and had ample supplies of anger for those of whom she disapproved. But now that Mary McCarthy is dead, good looks, outrageousness, disapproval, anger—all count for nothing. Only the work remains—much of it in her case, as has been said before, destructive and marred by a falsely moral snobbery—and since this gives so little in the way of pleasure or instruction, it is likely soon to dissipate, then disappear.

Mary McCarthy was among those who attacked Orwell. In 1969, she thought that he left no generative political ideas, that his concept of decency was badly in need of definition, that he was conservative by temperament and thus almost instinctively opposed to fashion, change, and innovation—that, finally and in 1969 devastatingly, he probably would have been on the wrong side in Vietnam. Others have written against Orwell: Anthony West attempted to diminish him by psychoanalyzing him; Kingsley Martin claimed that in *Animal Farm* he had lost faith not merely in the

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Soviet Union but in mankind; D. A. N. Jones felt that he unfairly blackened the picture against left-wing intellectuals and was father of the bashing of feminists, pacifists, homosexuals, and other left-minded groups that Jones views as part of the political distraction and irrelevance of the current day. Firing away with Howitzers, Uzis, and squirt guns, Raymond Williams, Conor Cruise O'Brien, and Terry Eagleton have all, in their turn and in their different times, taken their shots at him. Still others have spat upon, bepissed, and whacked away at the statue of Orwell, but without in any serious way staining it, let alone tipping it over.

No critic of high standing has ever claimed that George Orwell was a first-rate novelist, though John Wain, Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, and other distinguished writers have written approvingly of his novels. Orwell did not write enough literary criticism to qualify, strictly speaking, as a literary critic. When he did write about writers—as he did about Dickens, Kipling, Tolstoy, Henry Miller—his impetus was generally extra-literary. A number of his familiar and personal essays are immensely impressive, but the quantity of these essays is not great. As with every journalist who works on weekly and fortnightly deadlines—as Orwell did on *Tribune* and the London *Observer*—some weeks he was much better than others, and on many of those other weeks he could be pretty thin. He was splendid as a critic of popular culture—was something even of a pioneer in this field—but he could also come near ruining his work here through the intrusion of his own often rather coarse politics. After his admirably lucid account of the widely read sub-literature known as boys' weeklies, and a measured analysis of their social import, Orwell could not refrain from remarking that the stories in the boys' weeklies lead their readers to believe "that there is nothing wrong with laissez-faire capitalism"; and he ended his essay, most disappointingly, by suggesting that, given the significant impression that youthful reading tends to leave for life, it is surely time to develop left-wing stories for the boys' weekly market.

Orwell died, of tuberculosis, in 1950 at the much-too-early age of forty-six. In a relatively brief writing career, he produced a vast amount of work. Except toward the end of his life, when the royalties from *Animal Farm* began to arrive, he produced what he did under considerable financial strain. His wretched health increased the strain. Although Orwell much admired craft, and more than once wrote of the importance of the aesthetic element in his own writing, the circumstances under which he worked were always arduous and scarcely allowed for Flaubertian meticulousness. If not altogether by choice, he was much less the artist than the professional writer. He was also, as he came to learn, chiefly a political writer. "When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, 'I am going to produce a work of art.' I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing." Cyril Connolly later seconded this point, remarking that Orwell was "a political animal" who "reduced everything to politics . . . . He could not blow his nose without moralising on conditions in the handkerchief industry."

"Good prose," Orwell famously wrote, "is like a window pane," and the absence of artful window dressing in his own prose has been part of Orwell's attraction for many readers. He commanded a prose style that strongly implied truth-telling ought to take precedence over art. In some of his work—one thinks of the chapter on the role of the POUM in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) that he acknowledges may ruin his book but must nevertheless be included to set the record straight—this seemed to set Orwell *above* art, which, from a certain point of view, isn't a bad place to be.

Not, however, in the opinion of everyone. Conor Cruise O'Brien, reviewing the four-volume *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* when it appeared in 1968, interestingly noted that "plain

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language has a tendency to become extreme—which is why the other kind of language is generally preferred—and thus a laudable peculiarity of style made Orwell seem more extreme than he was." It has also made arriving at anything like a consensus about his true literary quality difficult. No agreement exists, for example, about which of Orwell's books is his best. Some profess admiration for *Homage to Catalonia*; some say the first, others the second half of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) represents his best work. Mary McCarthy called *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) Orwell's "masterpiece"; Cyril Connolly felt the same book was not more than "agreeable journalism" done much better by Henry Miller. Most sophisticated readers, when asked where the best of Orwell is to be found, reply, the essays; but even here consensus never quite arrives. Edmund Wilson, while admiring Orwell generally, thought that in his literary essays he had "the habit of taking complex personalities too much at their face value, of not getting inside them enough." Newton Arvin thought Orwell, as an essayist, "an excellent writer on certain sorts of subjects," but not up to writing on figures of the high cultural complexity of Yeats. Evelyn Waugh noted of Orwell: "He has an unusually high moral sense and respect for justice and truth, but he seems never to have been touched by a conception of religious thought and life." Apart from showing how discrepant opinions about Orwell can be, these views show how apt other writers were to read into Orwell, or discover missing from him, those qualities they thought most important in their own work. What was the quality in George Orwell that made other writers read him as if he were a Rorschach test? And might not this quality, too, be connected in some central way to the unflagging prominence of Orwell's reputation?

To get at the complex nature of Orwell's reputation, clearly something like a book-length study is required, or so at least Professor John Rodden, who teaches rhetoric at the University of Virginia and who has recently written such a book, must have felt. *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, which carries the subtitle "The Making and Claiming of 'St. George' Orwell," is a vast production.[1] The book is easily double the length of any single book its subject ever wrote, and carries behind it, in a giant academic caboose, more than twelve hundred footnotes, most of them discursive. Professor Rodden has to have read nearly everything ever written about or connected with or even loosely tangential to George Orwell, popular and academic, English, American, and European. The small-type index feels like the telephone directory of a small town. It is an exhaustive study.

Professor Rodden writes well enough, in a style that combines intellectual journalism with a heavy though not deadly admixture of academic locutions. There is little about his book, like so much current academic criticism, that bears the unmarked but unmistakable legend TO THE TRADE ONLY. And yet there is something about *The Politics of Literary Reputation* that makes it the near reverse, in the cant phrase, of "a good read." It is instead a rough and rambling "read." Less like a "read" at all, it feels like a long career, in which all one's movement is lateral. Professor Rodden views Orwell from every possible angle —as Rebel, as Prophet, as Common Man, as Saint—but somehow the portrait that emerges from all these angle shots comes out less rounded than blurred. Pace and progress seem to play no part in the argument. The struggle to get in everything is paramount. Rodden seems perpetually to be reconstructing "four phases of Orwell's reputation in postwar Germany," or demarcating his "three *Tribune* 'lives' between 1937-47," or noting that this or that critic's "history of reception" of Orwell's work can be divided into four or five parts. Near the close, Rodden refers to his book as "this project," and project is how

1 *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St. George' Orwell*, by John Rodden; Oxford University Press, 478 pages, $27.50.

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the reader—including the entirely interested reader—comes to view it, too. An exhaustive study, as I say.

Yet, for all Professor Rodden's labors, one feels that the job has not been done—that is, if the job has been to account for why a writer of George Orwell's particular quality has loomed as large as he has in the contemporary world. We get a great deal of background on the issues, questions, and problems connected with Orwell's career. We learn much about what he meant to his contemporaries, the generation immediately following them, and to the left-wing intellectuals of the current day. We are filled in on the dispute over the ultimate character of Orwell's politics and hence over the matter of his political legacy. Professor Rodden takes positions, is not shy about announcing his own politics ("left-of-center white male of working-class origins, a post-Vatican II Catholic liberal"), or fearful of speculating upon why one critic found Orwell attractive and another finds him repulsive. Rodden glues literally hundreds of small mosaics to the wall, but, somehow, a picture refuses to cohere. What one is left with are data, a vaster collection of facts about the career of a single writer than has perhaps ever before been gathered in a single place. But data, however interesting, remain data.

What is missing, I believe, is a stronger element of literary criticism than the author of *The Politics of Literary Reputation* chooses to provide. The choice was a deliberate one—"This book," writes Professor Rodden, "aims chiefly to describe the making and claiming of a reputation, rather than to argue a specific case for its upward or downward revaluation"—but it is not clear that the two activities, criticism and description, are so easily separable. Insofar as one of the tasks of criticism is to establish the quality of a writer with a view toward placing him among his contemporaries and predecessors, the reputation of any serious writer is almost always best understood from the perspective of criticism. Another of the tasks of criticism—one of the major ones, surely—is to confer just reputation. An unjust literary reputation, as ought by now to be well known, can be as easily built on a writer's defects as on his strengths; see, not merely passim, the last thirty or so years of American novelists. In the case of Orwell, one wonders if the question of how he arrived at his extraordinary reputation isn't bound up with the answer to the literary critical question of what kind of writer he was, strengths, defects, ambiguities, and all.

George Orwell has become a hero of culture. Other literary men have been heroes of culture over the past century, Henry James, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot among them. But these men derived their status from their art, for which they made heroic sacrifices and on which they left a permanent impress. But Orwell is extraordinary among heroes of culture in not being exclusively an artist, or even, strictly speaking, a figure whose most strenuous efforts were invested in high culture. One might even say that Orwell's status derives in good part from his very artlessness. Max Beerbohm once declared that "to be interesting, a man must be complex and elusive," citing the examples of Byron, Disraeli, and Rossetti as among the most interesting men in nineteenth-century England. But Orwell's power, much of his interest to us, comes from the reverse qualities: his simplicity and straightforwardness, at least as these are exhibited in the character he projected in his most powerful writing.

From the standpoint of reputation, character has always been Orwell's strongest asset. It was imputed to him early and continued to be conferred on him posthumously. "I was a stage rebel," wrote Cyril Connolly, who went to St. Cyprian's and then Eton with him, "Orwell a true one," adding: "The remarkable thing about Orwell was that alone among the boys he was an intellectual and not a parrot for he thought for himself." The imputation of strong character would heighten over the years. When Lionel Trilling came to write about Orwell, in an introduction to a 1952 edition

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of *Homage to Catalonia*, character had turned into virtue. Trilling allowed that Orwell was "not a genius," but emphasized that Orwell's virtue comprised "not merely moral goodness, but also fortitude and strength in goodness." That he was not a genius made him, in Trilling's view, all the more important, "for he communicates to us the sense that what he has done any one of us could do." (In Trilling's essay there follows a paragraph of extraordinary qualification that begins, "Or could do if we but made up our mind to it," which suggests most of us cannot; and here one senses how Lionel Trilling, that academic Demosthenes, his mouth filled not with pebbles but perpetual qualifications and hesitations, must have achingly envied Orwell's plainspokenness and readiness to act on his views.) From boy of character to man of virtue, Orwell was next (though not in strict chronological order) transmuted into "the wintry conscience of a generation," in V. S. Pritchett's obituary article in *The New Statesman* of January 28, 1950, "a kind of saint," a "Don Quixote" whose "conscience could be allayed only by taking upon itself the pain, the misery, the dinginess and the pathetic but hard vulgarities of a stale and hopeless period." One would like to think that George Orwell, reading all this, would have been mildly amused.

Yet these have been the terms in which, for the vast most part, Orwell has been judged. As Professor Rodden puts it, "If we see Pritchett's obituary [which also appeared in a somewhat different version in *The New York Times Book Review*] as one of those reception moments to which readers have repeatedly returned—like Trilling's introduction to *Homage to Catalonia* and Connolly's characterization of Orwell in *Enemies of Promise* (1938)—it offers further insight into the reputation process." Cyril Connolly, Lionel Trilling, and V.S. Pritchett make for a pretty fair triumvirate of testimonials, representing English and American literary criticism at its best from its aesthetic through its morally serious strain. Yet can the terms for judging Orwell that they have set down be sustained in our day?

I do not, myself, think that they quite can be. I say this with no great glee, for Orwell has been one of a small number of modern writers from whom my own way of viewing the world derives. Although one is trained, in judging literature, to ignore the life of a writer and concentrate on the work, anyone with any normal human feeling is always secretly delighted to learn that a writer he admires is also a man or woman he can respect. Part of the attractiveness of Orwell has of course been the respect that the integrity of his life invites. No finality in biography is available, and it may yet turn up that Orwell perpetuated some hideously caddish acts. But just now it does seem that a good part of the reason for the reverence in which he is held is the stupidity-ridden, disgrace-laden, generally shameful history of intellectual life of the past half century or so, against which Orwell's relative normality, common sense, and decency stand out.

At the same time, it ought not to stand in the way of a clear judgment of Orwell's work. Orwell was himself much concerned about what it is that makes for survival in literature and about the changing nature of literary reputation. In "Inside the Whale" (1940) he took up the change that had swept over the remains—that is to say, the poems—of A. E. Housman, who had been an important figure in his own generation when Orwell was young but seemed less so later. With typical good sense, he writes: "There is no need to under-rate him now because he was over-rated a few years ago." I don't mean to imply that Orwell, too, was overrated; he said things crucial to his day, and in so saying helped form not only the terms of the discussion but the history of that day and became one its central writers. Rereading Orwell in our day, one's admiration for his insight and intellectual courage do not lessen; quite the reverse, much that he wrote then seems no less pertinent now, and not as prophesy but as simple truth. Yet much in Orwell can also seem thin, or oddly skewed, inadequate, or simply wrong. George Orwell has reached that privileged position of high reputation where his

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weaknesses can be openly dealt with because his strengths are no longer in serious dispute. The time, surely, has come for a fuller portrait.

It will not, for example, any longer do to consider George Orwell principally as a Cold War writer. He was partly that, of course; one of the best and most important, possibly the primary anti-totalitarian writer of the late 1930s and 1940s, a time of great denial of the murderousness of left-wing totalitarianism. Orwell was a strong and straightaway anti-Communist. It was an honorable and lonely position, and one which a man who earned a small living by his writings paid for by being denied entry into many magazines. The significance of this strain in Orwell cannot be gainsaid; nor is it quite time, at least in the gardens of the Third World, to shuck it all off as once pertinent but no longer. But Orwell's anti-Communism grew not alone out of his historical experience—with his self-acclaimed talent for facing unpleasant facts—but also out of his exposure to intellectuals under political pressure. He repeatedly said that "the intellectuals are more totalitarian in outlook than the common people." He said it in dozens of different ways, and none of them tactful. "The truth is, of course," he wrote in "Raffles and Miss Blandish" (1944), "that the countless English intellectuals who kiss the arse of Stalin are not different from the minority who give their allegiance to Hitler or Mussolini."

Although Orwell described himself in *The Road to Wigan Pier* as "a semi-intellectual," he was among modern writers the fiercest anti-intellectual going. Perhaps he was just enough of an intellectual—bookish, someone interested in the play of ideas—to have understood and despised the type. Having gone to Eton but not on to university, Orwell was nicely positioned to feel no inferiority toward the general class of English intellectuals and yet not quite feel himself of that class, either. To become an intellectual was, for Orwell, to become deeply out of it, hypocritical, stupid, inhumanly corrupted, spiritually bankrupt. Here is a small bouquet of Orwell's prime remarks about intellectuals:

> They take their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow. —*The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941)

> It is only the "educated" man, especially the literary man, who knows how to be a bigot. —*The Road to Wigan Pier*

> One has to belong to the intelligentsia to believe things like that [that America had entered World War II to prevent an English revolution]; no ordinary man could be so stupid. —"Notes on Nationalism" (1945)

> [The leftish politics] of the English intellectual is the patriotism of the deracinated. —"Inside the Whale"

> England is perhaps the only great nation whose intellectuals are ashamed of their country. —*The Lion and the Unicorn*

Orwell wasn't much cheerier on the subject of what one might think of as intellectual auxiliaries. "A humanitarian is always a hypocrite," he wrote, "and Kipling's understanding of this is perhaps the central secret of his power to create telling phrases." Of Ezra Pound in particular, but of the conduct of artists generally, he noted: "One has the right to expect ordinary decency even of a poet." And of course his devastating shot at the grotesque unreality of those who flocked to contemporary Socialism, which appears in the second half of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, once read can scarcely be forgot: "The fact is that Socialism, *in the form in which it is now presented*, appeals chiefly to unsatisfactory or even inhuman types." Details not withheld: "One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words 'Socialism' and 'Communism' draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, 'Nature Cure' quack, pacifist and

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feminist in England." It gets worse, wilder, and, if you happen to be sitting on the right side of the aisle, even funnier.

Having declared intellectuals poison—and "the modern English literary world, at any rate the highbrow section of it, a sort of poisonous jungle where only weeds can flourish"—Orwell was thrown back on the figure he frequently referred to in his writing as "the common man." Sometimes this "common man" is assumed to be of the working class, a man who, quite rightly in Orwell's view, is entirely uninterested in the philosophical side of Marxism, with its "pea-and-thimble trick with those three mysterious entities, thesis, antithesis, and synthesis." Sometimes he is the "ordinary man," who "may not flinch from a dictatorship of the proletariat, if you offer it tactfully; [but] offer him a dictatorship of the prigs, and he gets ready to fight." People of "very different type can be described as the common man," Orwell wrote in his essay on Dickens.

But what marks this common man above all for Orwell is "a native decency," a distaste for abstraction, and an appreciation of the small pleasures and surface delights of life. When Orwell writes that "the common man is still living in the mental world of Dickens, but nearly every modern intellectual has gone over to some or other form of totalitarianism," he means that the common man retains a bred-in-the-bone respect for loyalty and kindness, courage and freedom, a hatred of unfairness and oppression, and a love for life in its everyday quality that the intellectual has bred out of himself. Mary McCarthy, it will be recalled, felt Orwell's concept of decency needed refining, but then she was herself almost the perfect type of intellectual and wasn't, in Orwell's view, likely to have understood it in any case.

Orwell understood it and tried by his best lights to live it. After his youthful years in the British imperial police in Burma, after his days of deliberately going down and out, he tried to live like the common man, at least in the outward appurtenances of his life. Bernard Crick's biography of Orwell, the most complete we now have, recounts several of the details of Orwell's almost aggressive anti-bohemianism.[2] On the other hand, he was blocked off from living in an easy middle-class way not only by his meager earnings as a free-lance writer but even more by his strong antipathy to the bourgeois life from which he had come. ("To have a horror of the bourgeois," said Jules Renard, "is bourgeois.") The result was that Orwell and his wife Eileen tended to muddle along somewhat grimly between working- and lower-middle-class living arrangements, with Orwell affecting proletarian habits. He smoked shag cigarettes, slurped his tea out of the saucer, cared not at all about clothes. In the last years of his life, with the royalties that were beginning to come in from *Animal Farm*, he bought a farm in Jura, in the Scottish Hebrides, where, with his sister and adopted son under his roof, he attempted to live the life of the hardscrabble farmer. As best he could, Orwell attempted, to use the French phrase he himself would doubtless have abjured, to live *dans le vrai*.

He attempted to write, too, *dans le vrai*, and one of his working assumptions, though so far as I know he never put it straightout, was that the truth of life has been distorted by much literature. As a literary critic, he was best as a revisionist—revising the received opinions about other writers that felt wrong to him. Allowing for Kipling's worst thoughts, he goes on to make the points that "Kipling deals in thoughts which are both vulgar and permanent," that "few people who have criticized England from the inside have said bitterer things about her than this gutter patriot," that he wrote "with responsibility" and knew that "men can only be highly civilized while other men, inevitably less civilized, are there to guard and feed them." (W. H. Auden, in his political phase during the 1930s, Orwell called "a sort of gutless Kipling.") He de-Marxified Dickens, showing how little interested in politics Dickens was, and asserted that "he was

2 *George Orwell: A Life*, by Bernard Crick, was published by Atlantic-Little, Brown in 1980.

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popular chiefly because he was able to express in comic, simplified and therefore memorable form that native decency of the common man." Brilliantly, he notes: "The outstanding, unmistakable mark of Dickens's writing is the *unnecessary detail*." In what is Orwell's best literary essay, "Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool" (1947)—an essay that anticipates and is superior to Isaiah Berlin's *The Hedgehog and the Fox*—he sides against Tolstoy, whose "main aim, in his later years, was to narrow the range of human consciousness," and with Shakespeare, who "loved the surface of the earth and the process of life . . . [and whose] main hold on us is through language."

George Orwell was half an artist. This was not sufficient to make him a memorable novelist, but it did put him in the class of the best English essayists, all of whom have also been, in their various ways, half artists. Serious visual art and music never come in for mention in Orwell; he is dead to the artistic significance of religion, toward which he was generally—and in the case of Roman Catholics particularly—antagonistic. But about literary art he was passionate: "So long as I remain alive and well I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth [the same phrase he uses in connection with Shakespeare], and to take a pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information." In another time, he might have been able to give way to this side of himself. But not in that in which he lived. In his own time politics was unavoidable, and he saw his job as reconciling "my ingrained likes and dislikes with the essentially public, non-individual activities that this age forces on all of us." As for his own ambition, about this he is entirely clear: "What I have wanted to do throughout the past ten years," he remarked in "Why I Write," "is to make political writing into an art."

How successful was Orwell at turning political writing into an art? Very, is one's unhesitating first response. A tradition of sorts was there. Burke, Paine, Cobden, Hazlitt, Macaulay had each produced political writing that—sometimes in flashes, sometimes in sustained patches—remains powerful, beautiful, greatly moving. In this tradition, political writing that aspired to art tended to go for the searing and the soaring, flamethrowers followed by French horns. Part of Orwell's distinction as a political writer is that he departed from this tradition by playing it flat and playing it straight. He described the indecency of shooting a Fascist when the man is running while trying to hold up his trousers; he described the loathsomeness of tripe on a coal miner's table; always and everywhere he described smells and filth, discomfort and disgust, and made plain that in war and in poverty "physical details always outweight everything else." When he took on a political subject, Orwell regularly warned against his bias, he struggled on the page before the reader to be as honest as possible within that bias; and his interest in any political event or issue had nothing to do with his establishing his own superiority to it. This was, in political writing, revolutionary, and, since Orwell's death in 1950, it remains without parallel.

Yet the limitations built into making political writing an art, and thus giving it a chance for survival, are considerable. For one, political writing is called into being by events and issues, and events and issues are in the fullness—sometimes in the leanness—of time settled, dissolved, simply forgotten. Of the writing about them, only the rhetoric remains, trailing the stale odor of once-strong opinion. For another, in politics, unlike in art, it is important that one be correct, or at the very minimum not altogether wrong. In "Politics vs. Literature" (1947), his essay on Swift, whom he called "one of the writers I admire with the least reserve," Orwell asks: "What is the relationship between agreement with a writer's opinions, and enjoyment of his work?" Orwell doesn't quite get around to answering this question, so let me answer it for him by saying that, in politics, where agreement exists it is usually immensely improved.

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As for Orwell's own politics, a subject of much contention, it can be said that all interpretations are equal, but some are more equal than others. In "Why I Write" he set them out in a single sentence: "Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 [since, that is, his experience of international betrayal in the Spanish Civil War] has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism, as I understand it." That sounds plain enough, but a twist is added: the progressive party of Orwell's time so revolted him—as, he notes, Swift was revolted by the progressive party of his own—that Orwell's most penetrating and original writing is about the detachment from political reality of left-wing intellectuals and its serious consequences in a world where horror, suffering, and organized murder are real enough. Yet, throughout his work there is a persistent rattling against the evils of "the utter rottenness of private capitalism"—for leftists of Orwell's generation capitalism was a weight station directly on the road to fascism—clichéd references to the filthy rich ("The lady in the Rolls-Royce car is now more damaging to morale than a fleet of Göring's bombing-planes," he wrote in *The Lion and the Unicorn*), false assertions ("Laissez-faire capitalism is dead"), and much else that one could pop into print in next week's issue of *The Nation* without anyone noticing.

On his deathbed, apropos of Evelyn Waugh, in his journal Orwell wrote: "One cannot really be a Catholic and grown up." In *Homage to Catalonia*, he wrote: "when I see an actual flesh-and-blood worker in conflict with his natural enemy, the policeman, I do not have to ask which side I am on." (The man could be a rapist, George; better ask.) Israel was for him just another variant of nationalism, and he despised nationalism in all its forms; case closed. "The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude," he wrote, in a sentence that not only illustrates Conor Cruise O'Brien's remark that "plain language has a tendency to become extreme" but has caused great mischief by being interpreted to mean that, at bottom, everything in the world is political in any case, so let 'er rip. Orwell was wrong about many things, and about some things not merely wrong but crudely, callowly wrong.

But on many important things Orwell was right. He was right to trust his instincts over his political opinions whenever the two clashed. He was right in recognizing that the major political question of his time was how best to confront totalitarianism and all its deceptions; and right again to do so head on, with all his art and all his heart and the vast quantity of courage at his command. He was right in his impatience with intellectual cant, and percipient in early underscoring the connection between totalitarian habits of thought and the corruption of language. Orwell was scarcely a genius, nor even, in any striking way, an original thinker. What he was was honest and what he had was unshakable integrity, and these qualities, working their magic, lent his writing great force and made him a figure crucial for his time and left him a model for our own. However high George Orwell's reputation may have risen, no matter how low it may one day fall, all this is finally part of the history of publicity. What matters is that through moral effort he made himself into a good writer. That is permanent, not subject to fluctuation, can never be taken away.

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"Monet in the '90s"

by Andrew Forge

Monet was fifty years old in 1890. Always a complainer, he now confessed to his intimates that he was feeling his age. Bad weather plagued him not just because it interrupted his work but because it brought on his rheumatism: it was time to review the past, to count his days.

The public had had twenty years and more to accustom itself to his vision. Monet was now secure, ensconced in the house in Giverny, his well-planted domain expanding around him. Recently there had been a large retrospective at the Galerie Georges Petit, shared with Rodin and timed to coincide with the 1889 Universal Exhibition, in which Monet had shown 150 works. It had been a famous success. His works were selling at unprecedented prices: that year an American had bought a painting for the vast sum of nine thousand francs.

Since Manet's death in 1883, Monet had been the unquestioned leader of his generation among the independents. But Seurat, nineteen years younger than Monet, had shown his *Grande Jatte* at the last of the Impressionist exhibitions in 1886. It was a painting of unmistakable importance, which, though built upon the foundations of Impressionism, appeared to reverse its premises at every point. Seurat's was a challenge that could not be ignored.

It is at this point in Monet's life that the wonderful exhibition "Monet in the '90s" opens.[1] Its curator, Professor Paul Hayes Tucker of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, has been able to re-assemble a strong representation of each of the series that Monet worked on between 1889 and 1900. Like any painter who worked out of doors, Monet's painting had always been grouped according to the places where he painted: the view chosen, after all, decided the nature of the painting. He had been in the habit of repeating views from the same position, often in pairs painted under different conditions of light. But in his campaign in the Creuse valley in the early spring of 1889, he had taken this tendency to an extreme point, painting exactly the same view again and again, putting together a suite of pictures that rang like the tolling of a bell. The exhibition opens with nine of the Creuse paintings and goes on through the *Grainstacks*, the *Poplars*, the Rouen Cathedral paintings, the *Mornings on the Seine*, the Norman coast paintings, and the views of the Thames, ending with the 1900 paintings in the *Japanese Bridge* series. There are also representative groups from his less well-known series: the *Oat Fields,* the *Ice Floes,* and the Norway *Mount Kolsaas* paintings. In lieu of a catalogue, Professor Tucker has published a book in which he advances an

1 "Monet in the '90s: The Series Paintings" was shown at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, from February 7 to April 29, 1990. It will be on view at the Art Institute of Chicago from May 19 to August 12, and at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, from September 7 to December 9.

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extraordinarily interesting interpretation of Monet's intentions during this decade.[2]

What was the point of these serial paintings? "It is not very difficult to understand," Monet airily told an interviewer years later. But it is very difficult to understand. These paintings are full of problems. The difficulty stems from the following contradiction: Monet was determined to develop each painting over an extended period of time but to do so without relinquishing his attachment to the Impressionist moment. The antinomies of impression and memory, of instantaneity and duration, of sketch and tableau, are in extreme tension throughout. He would not let go of either end of the contradiction.

When the *Cathedrals* were first shown as a group in 1895, Georges Clemenceau described them in *La Justice* in what to us seems a cinematic sense, regretting that the pictures had not been hung sequentially. Each painting, according to Clemenceau, represented a unique unrepeatable moment. Monet could have painted a hundred or a thousand of them: there were as many potential pictures within the motif as the mind could make divisions in time. For him, they were the apotheosis of Impressionism, carrying objective observation to unexplored heights. Symbolist critics took an opposite view. Octave Mirbeau, Gustave Geffroy, André Michel, and others saw them as arbitrary dreams, dreams of light, fantasies, transfigurations of reality, poems.

Clemenceau's account of the façades suggests a painter working as if shooting clay pigeons. He speaks of Monet at work "*dans un accès de fureur*," but anyone looking at these pictures can see that they were laboriously built, layer upon layer, and that the effect of one layer of paint upon another is premeditated by at least the time it takes for thick oil paint to dry. Clemenceau knew Monet and must have known that in expressing this notion of Monet as a sharpshooter, emphasizing the sequential aspect of the series, he was supporting Monet's own mythic account, his favorite view of himself. A description of Monet at work had been published by Guy de Maupassant in the Eighties. Maupassant tells of Monet's trek to the cliff-top where he was working, followed by children carrying canvases that he had already started and that he now takes up again, switching from one to another as the light changes. Thirty years later this was still the version that Monet told the duc de Trevise. When he started to paint the *Grainstacks*, he told him, he thought that two canvases would be enough, one for sunshine, one for overcast. But the story ends with his stepdaughter running back and forth to the studio to fetch more canvases: "And I worked on each one only when I had my effect . . . . that's all."

The facts were, of course, very different. At the time he was talking about, Monet habitually reworked his studies in the studio. He told a close friend, Geffroy, that a painting that came quickly disgusted him. Sometimes the reworking extended over months, notably with the Rouen façades and the Thames series, both of which were concluded at Giverny. And yet he would hardly admit to outsiders that he owned a studio.

The less sympathetic among the younger critics did not question his story. It was far too good a target for their sarcasm. Félix Fénéon made fun of Monet "juggling his stretchers, jostled by the storm" and André Michel found "these acrobatics" as puerile as they were trifling. Fénéon found Monet's art akin to photography, material in spirit, intuitive, quotidian, in contrast to Seurat's which was learned, scientific, and timeless in its aspiration.

Associated with this criticism was another: that Monet was indifferent to what he painted. A cathedral was neither more nor less important than a grainstack. Both were simply adequate grist for his painting mill. Camille Mauclair, writing about the *Cathedrals*, protested that Monet had devalued subject matter to a point at which

2 *Monet in the '90s: The Series Paintings*, by Paul Hayes Tucker; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston/Yale University Press, 307 pages, $45; $24.95 paper.

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a painting was simply "an ensemble of the means of representation" and that merit lay only in being able to paint "no matter what."

The early supporters of modernism followed these lines of criticism. To Roger Fry, Monet's paintings were formless, without structure, somewhat vulgar. Monet was interested in the documentation of appearances and nothing else. These views have been radically revised since the 1950s. The *Nymphéas* and the rediscovered late paintings have been seen as unacknowledged forebears of informal abstract painting. The structures of Abstract Expressionism, which were unimaginable to Roger Fry, have permitted new readings. At the same time art historians have questioned the cliché that Monet meant nothing by his choices of subject. The pioneer here was Robert L. Herbert, who combined a passionate love for Impressionism with a penetrating practical eye and the apparatus of a social historian. What Herbert pointed out—that what one saw on the face of these pictures was the product of the kind of forethought and calculation of delayed effect that the Monet myth, with its pretense of spontaneity in the open air, completely ruled out—was not exactly news to painters. But to anyone who accepted the "only an eye" view of Monet, it must have come as a matter of astonishment. The search for intention was extended to every aspect of his painting, and, as a result, an entirely new Monet emerged who was no less thoughtful about his subject matter than Manet—and, perhaps because of the less imagistic nature of his painting, even more wide open to interpretation.

Professor Tucker's previous book on Monet dealt with the years 1871 to 1878, when Monet was living in Argenteuil and finding his subjects in the observation of modern life.[3] Argenteuil was a small market town that was in the process of changing into an industrial suburb of Paris. Monet's painting projected a forward-looking idyll, celebrating the railway, the yachting, the promise of industry, life opened up and democratized, rural life enjoyed as a garden. But there is an elegiac tone to Tucker's discussion of one of the last paintings from Argenteuil, a view along the flower-covered riverbank looking along the promenade that Monet had painted many times before: "What it shows is the town as the modern industrial suburb, which although filled with smoking factories, could still give birth to golden illusions and still attract pleasure seekers with its semblance of seductive nature. But it required of both its residents and its weekend visitors belief in the beauty of modernity . . . . And Monet in 1877 no longer had that faith."

By the end of the decade Monet had turned away from modern life and had become a painter of landscapes without people. There are no more suburbs, no more yachtsmen, no more trains. But this swerve did not represent a retreat. Whatever else might be in doubt about his subsequent work, one thing is certain: it was massively ambitious. The most arresting passages in Tucker's new book deal with the character of that ambition, drawing our attention to aspects of Monet that have been neglected until now, having to do with his response to challenges external to his art.

The first of these challenges was, of course, Seurat's threat to his position as leader of the avant-garde. But beyond that the mood of the time was equally affecting. France was still smarting under the defeat and humiliation of 1871. There was a general anxiety about her standing as a European power. The century drew to its end in an atmosphere of decline, of economic and industrial weakness and of cultural decadence in relation to her rivals. In the field of painting, the question was repeated in a dozen different ways: Were there any great artists of the time? Monet was concerned not only to reassert his position as the foremost independent, but to claim a central position for himself in the national culture. His ambition was to be nothing less than the premier representative of French painting.

3 *Monet at Argenteuil*, by Paul Hayes Tucker, was published by Yale University Press in 1982.

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The argument becomes plausible when one considers how competitive he was, how aware of his reputation. Monet collected his reviews and held forth to the press like a prima donna. The image that he projected of a self-taught artist whose only studio was the out-of-doors was the invention of a sophisticated and worldly mind. He was adept at manipulating collectors and dealers. During the Nineties he forced his prices up by leaps and bounds and by the end of the decade he was, for a painter, very rich indeed.

But none of this implies compromise. His ambition was as stubborn and intransigent as it had ever been. His painting must answer Seurat's challenge on its own Impressionist conditions, finding a monumentality that was radical, owing nothing to the past, that achieved its grandeur by a heroic concentration of its own terms. It is astonishing that such an obsessive worker should have stopped painting for nearly a year in order to mount a campaign to purchase, by subscription, Manet's *Olympia* and donate it to the State. This was partly out of concern for Manet's widow, who was experiencing hard times. It was partly to claim Manet's mantle with a degree of publicity, as some of his less charitable colleagues were quick to point out. But it was also out of a determination to force recognition of the new painting upon official institutions.

Tucker shows how in all the subjects that Monet concentrated upon during the Nineties we can read the particular quality of his patriotism. It was an artist's patriotism, consistent with his anti-authoritarianism. It was the soil of France he honored, not her institutions. The *Grainstacks* and the *Poplars*, whose name was synonymous with the People, stood as powerful symbols of the strength of France, husbandry, agrarian well-being. The Seine was the central artery of the nation. The Norman coast, with its cliffs and lookout points, was the country's bastion. Rouen was the medieval capital. Tucker develops his account of Monet's ambition in great detail.

Monet turned away from his self-appointed role as laureate painter of La Belle France only at the end of the decade. The catalyst was the Dreyfus affair. In the split that divided French society he remained firmly on the Left. He deeply admired Zola's courage and was appalled by the wave of anti-Semitism and militarism that crested during 1898-99. "The Affair had inextricably altered his vision of France," Tucker writes. As he had done thirty years earlier, Monet went to England, rediscovering some motifs of his youth, taking on his old adversary Turner, testing out new audiences. When he returned to France it was with his back turned to national issues. From then on it was the water garden, the private world that he had created within the boundaries of his domain, that would monopolize his attention.

Obviously Monet's motives were over-determined. Tucker's concentration upon external challenges is a salutary counter to the modernist account which has concentrated too exclusively on the internal development. But the two ways of looking interlock. The ambition that Tucker outlines has a certain crazy grandeur that matches features that one recognizes simply from looking at the pictures. In all its structures, from the largest aspects of composition to the smallest interval between one color mark and the next, Monet's painting asserts the primacy of vision. It presents a world *seen*. There is an element of fantasy here, an omnipotent claim. The eye can gobble up whatever it lights upon. It is greedy and omnivorous. The notion that subject matter did not concern Monet recognizes a feature that it grossly misinterprets: Impressionism must encompass everything, all seasons, all climates, all locations, not just the gentle Ile-de-France but North and South, storm and heat, snow and blazing blossoms, the "unpaintable" effects of running water, thickets, gleams, shifting fog. Such imperious greed could finally find satisfaction only in a subject matter that was of its own constructing (the water garden) and in its mirror (the *Nymphéas* decorations) that would envelop the onlooker like a world.

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It is in this context that we can perhaps understand something of the mystery of Monet's persistent misrepresentation of his procedure. Clearly there was a massive emotional investment in this image of himself, the "natural" painter pitting hand and eye against time and the elements. This was where his potency was located, where the masculine act took place. His reworkings, his studio meditations, were retrospective, calling upon memory and a kind of looking that was closer to reverie than to action. His exploits out of doors were extreme and tested his will and endurance to the limit. Among the most reckless of these was the season in Norway in 1895 when he painted Mount Kolsaas in the dead of winter, astonishing his Norwegian colleagues with his hardiness. It is surely not irrelevant that his host on this occasion was his stepson.

To the painter working directly from observation, time is an inevitable ingredient in his subject matter. The light changes, the leaves turn from green to silver in the wind, the clouds begin to blacken. To paint is as necessarily sequential as to play chess. Meanwhile, somewhere between time "out there" in the changing light and time "here" in the sequence of changes on the canvas, there is another unfolding in time, the gradual movement toward understanding in which the evolving painting reveals its nature. These orders of time stand in the same relation to each other as the subject painted—tree or figure, cathedral or stack—stands in the interrelation of its manifold presences. In front of a Monet cathedral façade, different façades come and go: the façade represented, the façade itself that lies behind its representation, and finally the presence of the picture, the picture-façade.

Looking back and forth, as one can in this exhibition, between different versions of the same subject—the *Headland of the Petit Ailly*, for example, of which there are four versions—the sense of instantaneity that the series idea seems at first to promote, falls right away. Comparison of one picture with another does not convey sequential time or anything like it. The light in each is specific to each picture, growing out of the logic of the palette of each, from the point at which he found a particular lilac, a particular gold or emerald green as the formula for the life of the painting. What one is aware of, looking at the picture, is something like an act of reconstruction, putting together Monet's attention to these colors and their behavior: the cliff and its representation seems to have withdrawn into memory. The picture-cliff looms up with its own radiance, displacing them both.

Monet's ambition was uncompromising. Whatever generality Impressionism was capable of, it had to be achieved in truth to its essential nature, which was direct, experiential, "in the first person." Monet slowly learned that this firsthandedness could be found in his attachment to the picture and that the heroic authenticities of observation out of doors meant nothing unless they were matched by the authenticities of his choices on the canvas. The paradox inherent in his work of the Nineties was that the series format freed him from exactly those constraints that it appeared to celebrate: repetition freed him from time-bound, local representation; it allowed each painting to grow under his hand in its unique color structure, to give back its unique light. The myth surrounding the creation of these paintings was easy for Monet to perpetuate, but the truth of their creation, and its importance to him as an artist, was difficult to explain.

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The enigma of Randall Jarrell

by Bruce Bawer

The ways we miss our lives are life.
—Randall Jarrell, "A Girl in a Library"

Who was Randall Jarrell? Doubtless his poetry has misled more than a few casual readers into thinking that it holds easy answers to this question. For if the elegant, well-bred manner of his most familiar poems seems closer to that of Elizabeth Bishop than to the emotional turbulence of so-called confessional poets like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, the subject matter of much of Jarrell's verse seems, on first blush, to be frankly autobiographical. The first-person singular pronoun crops up frequently. A typical early poem, "A Camp in the Prussian Forest" (1946), begins: "I walk beside the prisoners to the road." The opening lines of a typical later poem, "The Player Piano" (1965), read: "I ate pancakes one night in a Pancake House / run by a lady my age." But the relation between the events presented in these poems and Jarrell's own life and personality proves to be far from straightforward. Though "A Camp in the Prussian Forest," like many of the poems from the collections *Little Friend, Little Friend* (1945) and *Losses* (1948), takes place in war-torn Europe, the fact is that Jarrell, who served in the Army Air Corps, never left the States during World War II and didn't visit Europe until two years after the poem's composition; as for "The Player Piano," its speaker—like those in many of the poems that Jarrell gathered in *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* (1960) and *The Lost World* (1965)—turns out to be female.

Jarrell's literary essays and reviews offer a similar illusion of intimacy. In them, he is quick to use the word *I*, quick to introduce personal anecdotes ("I was floating in a quarry with my chin on a log when I first discovered that I knew 'Provide, Provide'"), quick to refer to his own emotions (the first sentence of the first essay in his first collection of prose begins: "When I was asked to talk about the Obscurity of the Modern Poet I was delighted"). He presents himself as someone who, like Wordsworth, understands poetry as the expression of a "man speaking to men," and who responds to it as a man rather than as a disembodied Parnassian authority. His chummy, personal tone draws the reader to him, implies that the reader shares his wit and discernment, his superiority to crude and conventional ways of thinking about life and literature; one of the foremost achievements of Jarrell's essays, indeed, is that a typical reader, instead of being intimidated by his strict critical standards and by the blunt, even caustic way in which he often expresses his judgments, finds himself charmed by Jarrell's personality—his keenness, his rapture, his exasperation. The reader feels less as if he is perusing a literary essay than as if he is listening to a friend talking honestly and without inhibition about his latest reading. Here too, however, the appearance of intimacy is deceptive: one comes away from Jarrell's

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essays knowing very little, really, about the man behind them.

Yet the illusion of intimacy created by much of Jarrell's poetry and prose—and the poignant, tantalizingly brief glimpse of his childhood that is afforded in his last book of poems, *The Lost World*—serve only to make one more curious about Jarrell's life than one might otherwise be. As if to heighten this curiosity, recent years have seen a flood of revealing books about Jarrell's colorful fellow poets Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Delmore Schwartz—all of which have underlined, by contrast, the degree to which the man behind Jarrell's oeuvre remains a mystery. Nor did the 1985 appearance of Jarrell's own letters satiate one's curiosity: energetic and friendly and opinionated as they were, Jarrell's letters (at least those chosen for inclusion by Mary von Schrader Jarrell, the poet's widow and editor of the *Letters*) were also quite superficial; one never had the feeling that one was seeing very far beneath Jarrell's surface. One came away from the letters, indeed, more certain than ever that a biography was needed—a biography that would augment the letters with ample testimony from other sources on Jarrell's life and personality. One was pleased to learn that William Pritchard, a professor at Amherst College and the author of *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered* (1984), was at work on such a book, because the penetration and sensitivity of his literary criticism for *The Hudson Review* and other publications suggested that he would be a perfect match for Jarrell.

In many ways, Pritchard has succeeded very impressively as Jarrell's biographer. His discussions of Jarrell's writings are perceptive, his critical judgments mostly impeccable. His prose style (despite several surprising grammatical slips) rather recalls that of Jarrell's best poetry. It is graceful, temperate, and lucid, with few outré words, never too much or too little punctuation, and (every so often) a word, phrase, or line repeated a few lines later for emphasis. It is (to use a word Pritchard applies to Jarrell's war poems) "unflashy."

But *Randall Jarrell: A Literary Life* is, in other ways, somewhat disappointing.[1] "My overriding purpose in this book," Pritchard explains, "is to give [Jarrell's] writings the detailed attention and quotation they deserve." Pritchard's main interest, in other words, is in Jarrell's writing, not in his life. There is nothing wrong with this, per se: one is hardly hungry for an excessively detailed biography along the lines of, say, Paul Mariani's voluminous *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (1981), from which one emerges with the feeling that one has sat through every meal of the subject's life; nor does one want a book full of pointlessly sensational anecdotes, like Ted Morgan's *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs* (1988). It could, needless to say, be argued that there are too many literary biographies nowadays anyway. But Pritchard set out to do a biography, and there's little point to doing one in the first place if one is not determined to figure out what made one's subject tick. Pritchard not only seems to lack this determination; he seems overly discreet, reluctant to open any can of worms or peer into any family closets. His acknowledgments begin with the statement that his "foremost debt is to Mary Jarrell," and there is a feeling throughout almost of diffidence, of unwillingness to say things that might hurt the feelings of the poet's loved ones. This is, I suppose, admirable; but it hardly makes for revealing biography. Though Pritchard goes on in his acknowledgments, moreover, to thank many interview subjects, his biographical information comes almost entirely out of Jarrell's own letters. This is a significant failing: first, because no biography should rely so much upon the subject's own testimony (especially when there are scores of surviving students,

1 *Randall Jarrell: A Literary Life*, by William H. Pritchard; Michael di Capua Books/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 338 pages, $25. Pritchard also is the editor of Jarrell's newly published *Selected Poems* (Michael di Capua Books/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 115 pages, $17.95).

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friends, and relatives); second, because Jarrell's testimony is so unenlightening. (Nor has Mary Jarrell helped in this regard: though Pritchard thanks her for allowing him to read and quote from letters not included in *Randall Jarrell's Letters*, on at least one occasion in the biography it is clear that he has not been permitted to see everything.)

Pritchard's treatment of Jarrell's death is representative of the problems with his approach. Soon after turning fifty in 1965, Jarrell (who had theretofore seemed, as twentieth-century American poets go, eminently stable) became depressed, then manic, giving a waitress a fifteen-hundred-dollar tip and introducing Hannah Arendt to a college audience with a twenty-minute disquisition on the quarterback Johnny Unitas; in short order, he slashed his wrist, was hospitalized and released, and (on October 14, 1965) stepped in front of a car and was killed. Most of those who knew Jarrell consider his death a suicide; the conspicious exception is Mary Jarrell, who has always deemed it an accident. Pritchard is reluctant to side with the suicide faction, and is capable of waxing uncharacteristically sardonic about those who do, commenting that "the biographer Jeffrey Meyers has devoted much energy to proving conclusively that the death *must* have been a suicide." Pritchard is a far more sensitive and scrupulous critic than Meyers, but he seems, for his part, to have devoted an unusual amount of energy to challenging the case for suicide. He reviews the facts of the case in a manner that seems designed, at every turn, to cast doubt on the verdict of suicide, then concludes that "it is not only impossible but also unimportant to 'decide' about Jarrell's death by labeling it suicide or accident."

By refusing to "decide" about Jarrell's death, however, Pritchard refuses also to "decide" about the life that preceded it. For if Jarrell did kill himself, that act tells us something crucial about him—or, more specifically, confirms something that his letters and Pritchard's book lead us to suspect. For, though Jarrell doesn't come entirely into focus in the letters or biography, one impression emerges strongly from both books: that this was a man who was hiding an important part of himself from the world, and perhaps from himself as well. Yet Pritchard seems disinclined to uncover that hidden part, disinclined to push beyond the sunny surfaces of Jarrell's letters. On the contrary, he sometimes strikes one as being overly eager to protect Jarrell from the idea that he was emotionally more complex and troubled than he would have had people believe, and seems almost to approach the matter as if having well-developed defense mechanisms were a criminal charge and the biographer a defense attorney. Though Pritchard says in his introduction that, while working on the book, he has "become aware of just how strange a phenomenon [Jarrell] was," he nonetheless seems eager to paint Jarrell as an Essentially Normal Human Being who, in the last months of his life and for some unknown and unknowable reason, lost his emotional balance.

But Pritchard doesn't convince. He makes a point, for instance, of Jarrell's having had "deep" friendships; but the striking thing about this book is that, to judge by its account of what seem to have been Jarrell's most important friendships—with Robert Lowell, Peter Taylor, and Robert Penn Warren—none of them was at all close. Though Jarrell could converse brilliantly with his friends about literature and the arts, and offer superb critiques of their work, he was detached and inexpressive when it came to more personal matters. His letters, and the memorial essays collected by Lowell, Taylor, and Warren in *Randall Jarrell: 1914-1965*, reveal no outbursts of temper, no periods of emotional stress (before his last year), no occasion when he sat down with a friend and groused about his marriage or ruminated on the meaning of life. Even his best friends seem to have been completely surprised by his 1951 divorce from his first wife, Mackie; in a letter to Lowell, Jarrell mentions the divorce in a breathtakingly dispassionate and perfunctory tone, omits to

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inform Lowell of his affair with Mary (which had prompted the split), and attributes the break-up to the fact that he and Mackie have been "getting further and further apart" and that they "had almost none of the same interests."

At times, Jarrell comes across as one of those people who mistake tyranny for intimacy. If his friends were (as Pritchard writes) "either corrected, ignored or expected to loudly agree" with his opinions, the women in his life were expected to manifest "total immersion in his concerns." Pritchard describes Jarrell as being "interested in women rather than sex"; actually, one gets the impression that he was less interested in women than he was in their being interested in him. Complaining to Mary, during his year (1951-52) at Princeton, about the "sordid or faintly unpleasant or improper" conversation of "Princeton Intellectuals," he quipped: "Me for Queen Victoria, as far as Public Life is concerned." But he would seem to have been something of a Victorian even among friends. What emerges from Pritchard's book, in short, is a picture of an almost tragically remote individual. During his lifetime, some of Jarrell's fellow writers wondered why he was so happy in such a cultural backwater as the Women's College in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he taught from 1947 until his death; but one suspects that part of the reason he stayed there was that he felt more comfortable at Greensboro—where, as the faculty's sole *homme des lettres*, he could remain relatively aloof from the other professors—than he would have felt at, say, Harvard or Princeton, where he would doubtless have been forced into circumstances of fraternal intimacy (or some semblance thereof) with other highly intelligent poets and critics.

Friends also wondered at Jarrell's seemingly neurotic attachment to his pet cat, Kitten. His epistolary references to Kitten are numerous (as Pritchard notes, Kitten "is one of the principal characters in the index to Jarrell's letters") and by turns winsome and bizarre. Stationed in Texas during World War II, Jarrell wrote enthusiastically to Mackie about some photographs she'd sent: "I want some more of Kitten and some more of you." Years later, he listed the "precious objects" in his bedroom: "photographs of Donatello sculpture, photographs of Mary von Schrader, two of [his friend] Elisabeth [Eisler]'s drawings, a map of Salzburg on the door, and a big *big* picture of Kitten." Pritchard sees the Kitten complex as "a central instance of Jarrell's extravagance of spirit." But why did Jarrell get extravagant over a cat and not, say, over a series of teenage girls? One supposes it was because Kitten offered love and companionship without demanding openness, vulnerability, self-exposure.

Jarrell's favorite relationships seem to have been avuncular or teacher-student ones—relationships over which he could exercise a degree of control and in which he could keep a certain distance. Thus his extraordinary enthusiasm for other people's children (and his utter lack of interest in having children of his own) and for his students; it is as if he wanted to be close to others but was reluctant to let them become close to him. His relationship to his two stepdaughters (the offspring of Mary's first marriage) comes across as one-dimensionally affable and affectionate; the younger stepdaughter, Beatrice, has described him as a "ideal father," a characterization which occasions an astute comment from Pritchard: "The phrase is aptly dual in implication—in the sense not only of perfect but of unreal; he was not a 'real' father who made demands on, suffered through, and was thoroughly implicated in the life of his child." This is precisely the image one gets of Jarrell as a stepfather.

One might describe Jarrell as something of a bystander: at parties, he tended to sit off to the side, reading the host's books and commenting cleverly on them, or talking about the other guests. His only novel, the wonderfully witty *Pictures from an Institution* (1954), is an onlooker's book: its narrator, a smart, wisecracking teacher at a progressive women's college not unlike Sarah

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Lawrence (where Jarrell taught for a year before moving to Greensboro), observes the other characters, as it were, from the sidelines. As Pritchard notes, "the narrator 'is' Jarrell, to the extent that his qualities and characteristics are blatantly those of his animator." But those "qualities and characteristics" are wholly superficial; while he industriously catalogues the vices, hypocrisies, and vulnerabilities of everyone else on campus, Jarrell takes extraordinary care not to give us so much as a glimpse into the heart of his own alter ego.

Part of the reason why Jarrell's personality doesn't come into focus in Pritchard's book, then, lies in the extremely private nature of that personality. But part also lies with Pritchard, who pays too little attention to most of his subject's extraliterary enthusiasms. For instance, Jarrell was passionately devoted to auto racing, of all things. But Pritchard doesn't scrutinize this interest at all; it takes on no more dimension or meaning than a hobby listed in a *Playboy* centerfold. Even more significant, perhaps, is Jarrell's rather disturbing post-World War II ardor for the German language. His 1950 poem "Deutsch Durch Freud" begins with the line: "I believe my favorite country's German." What, one wonders, brought on this curious passion—and in someone who had so recently been composing poems about concentration camps?

Perhaps Jarrell's biggest enthusiasm of all was childhood. Not only did he enjoy other people's children, compose a memorable long poem ("The Lost World") about his childhood, and write four highly regarded children's books; he was himself childlike in many ways—for example, in his frank displays of fervor and antipathy for people and poems alike, and in his public displays of affection for Kitten. (Lowell, in a sonnet, called him "Child Randall.") What was all this about? Notes Pritchard: "The man who, on the basis of his later poems, seems to have had a happy childhood was in fact deeply at odds with that childhood and with his parents' part—or lack of part—in it." The truth is that "The Lost World" draws only on a brief period of his childhood—namely, on the year when the twelve-year-old Jarrell lived with his grandparents (whom he called "Pop" and "Mama") and his great-grandmother in Hollywood, California. However much Jarrell romanticized this interval in later decades, it seems genuinely to have been the happiest time of his childhood. Certainly the rest of his childhood goes almost unmentioned in his work: his birth in Tennessee to Owen Jarrell (who came from poor rural stock) and Anna Campbell Jarrell (the daughter of a well-to-do Nashville business family); his early years in Los Angeles and Long Beach, where his father struggled along as a photographer's assistant and then as a photographer; his parents' separation, and his return, with his mother and younger brother, to Nashville, where Anna taught English at a secretarial school, and where (after his glorious year in Hollywood) Jarrell attended Hume-Fogg High School and Vanderbilt University.

Jarrell was a precocious boy, well-read and self-possessed and not above showing off his precocity. By his junior year at Hume-Fogg, he had already found his mature critical voice, scoffing wittily in the school paper at a Little Theatre production of *Hamlet* (the ghost, he remarked, had made him break into laughter) and lauding a production of *The Wild Duck*, which he called "one of the intellectual experiences of one's life." At Vanderbilt, he quickly became notorious for his ready sarcasm and classroom oratory: his teacher John Crowe Ransom remembered him as an "insistent and almost overbearing talker," an "*enfant terrible*"; Warren, also one of his teachers, found Jarrell so arrogant in class, and so patronizing toward his less-than-brilliant fellow students, that he had to speak to him about it.

Yet Ransom and Warren recognized Jarrell's intelligence and praised his solemn, grandiloquent verse. Within a couple of years, both men were publishing his poetry and reviews—Warren at *The Southern Review*, Ransom at the *Kenyon* (which was published, of course, at Ohio's Kenyon

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College, where Jarrell spent two years under Ransom as a graduate assistant and instructor). A third mentor was Allen Tate, though Tate's relations with Jarrell cooled considerably when the latter followed his own instincts, rather than Tate's directives, in putting together his first collection of poems, *Blood for a Stranger* (1942). Tate's resentment over this perceived betrayal lingered: after Jarrell's death, he would call him (in a letter to a friend) a "gifted, self-adulating little twerp." But one gathers that Jarrell's crime, in Tate's eyes, was not so much self-adulation as it was a stubborn native indifference to the unwritten rules of the academy: just as Ransom was put off by Jarrell's unacademic personal demeanor and by the immoderate, irreverent tone of his criticism, so Tate was angered by Jarrell's refusal to be a typical academic protégé—angered, in other words, by his independence of mind. (He wouldn't be the last.)

After receiving his M.A. from Kenyon, Jarrell taught for three years at the University of Texas, where his students' ignorance appalled him; in 1943 he entered the Army Air Corps, where his fellow soldiers proved to be even more ignorant than his students. "The conversation," he wrote Mackie (whom he had married in 1940) from a Texas base, "is on a level that makes you disbelieve even in the existence of, say, Proust . . . . In a lecture today we were twice told that we must obey orders 'promptly and willfully'; isn't that charming?" Pritchard comments that "Jarrell truly sounds charmed by [his fellow soldiers'] mistakes"; if so, it was in the way that tourists are charmed by animals in a zoo. Jarrell insisted in his letters—and Pritchard believes—that his fellow soldiers held him in high regard, and perhaps they did; but Pritchard shows no sign of having spoken to any of those soldiers, and offers no quotations from any of them on the matter. Nor is it clear, from Pritchard's discussion, whether Jarrell, in his letters, mentioned any fellow soldiers by name. No names, in any event, appear in the biography; and if Jarrell never did name any of them to Mackie it would seem to support one's sense that he related to them not as individuals but as types.

Certainly this conclusion seems to be supported by his war poems, whose collective weakness stems not, as some suggest, from Jarrell's utter lack of combat experience (as Pritchard points out, neither Whitman nor Melville, America's great Civil War poets, was a soldier) but from his supremely impersonal approach. Wilfred Owen remarked of his own war poems that "The Poetry is in the pity," and Pritchard perceptively suggests that Jarrell thought of his own war poems in much the same way; but James Dickey (in a 1955 review, quoted by Pritchard, of Jarrell's *Selected Poems*) gets to the heart of the poems' failure: "Did Jarrell never love any *person* in the service with him?" Dickey argues that Jarrell's war poems are populated by "types" and accuses him of a "monstrous, abstract, complacent, and inhuman Compassion." "Monstrous" may be going too far, but Dickey is otherwise right on the money: the graver his theme, the further back Jarrell tended to step from it, indulging in empty rhetoric, ponderous ironies, and a facile, generalized pity. His most famous poem, "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," is only one of many (and is certainly the best) whose speaker is dead, a casualty of war. In "The Metamorphoses," for instance, a sailor floats in a harbor "with gills in my sides," and notes that "the blood of the transports is red on the tide." In "Come to the Stone . . . ," a child speaks from the grave: "The people are punishing the people—why? / . . . / *Come to the stone and tell me why I died.*" And in "The State," another child declares: "I'm dead, and I want to die."

Throughout these poems, Jarrell takes on potentially tragic themes and clutches at cheap pathos. During these early years, critics often chided him for echoing Auden, and that influence is certainly evident in his manifest longing to Say Something about the awfulness of war. But Jarrell had little gift for the poetry of vast pronouncements.

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His best military poems, indeed, tend to be quieter, smaller-scale ones, poems which could conceivably have been based on his own experience. Among these is "Absent with Official Leave," which enters the mind of a soldier lying in bed:

> The lights are beginning to go out in the barracks.
> They persist or return, as the wakeful hollow,
> But only for a moment; then the windows blacken
> For all the hours of the soldier's life.
>
> It is life into which he composes his body.
> He covers his ears with his pillow, and begins to drift
> (Like the plumes the barracks trail into the sky)
> Past the laughs, the quarrels, and the breath of others
>
> To the ignorant countries where civilians die
> Inefficiently, in their spare time, for nothing . . .
> The curved roads hopping through the aimless green
> Dismay him, and the cottages where people cry
>
> For themselves and, sometimes, for the absent soldier—
> Who inches through hedges where the hunters sprawl
> For birds, for birds; who turns in ecstasy
> Before the slow small fires the women light
>
> His charmed limbs, all endearing from the tub.
> He dozes, and the washed locks trail like flax
> Down the dark face; the unaccusing eyes
> That even the dream's eyes are averted from
>
> See the wind puff down the chimney, warm the hands
> White with the blossoms it pretends are snow . . .
> He moans like a bear in his enchanted sleep,
> And the grave mysterious beings of his years—
>
> The causes who mourn above his agony like trees—
> Are moved for their child, and bend across his limbs
> The one face opening for his life, the eyes
> That look without shame even into his.
>
> And the man awakes, and sees around his life
> The night that is never silent, broken with the sighs
> And patient breathing of the dark companions
> With whom he labors, sleeps, and dies.

This is just the right pitch for Jarrell. If his rhetoric generally got away from him when he tried to write about the more intense aspects of war and army life, this pensive, unhurried poem about a sleeping soldier finds him (for the most part) in control. The soldier here seems closer to a real human being than do the symbolically rendered servicemen, refugees, and *faux-naïf* children in most of Jarrell's other war poems. The best thing about "Absent with Official Leave," however, is that, unlike most of Jarrell's war poems, it does not throw off easy ironies or brazenly solicit pity: the tone is more one of commiseration than of condescension, more one of thoughtful resignation than of slick reproach. As Pritchard notes, the poem neither pities the soldier nor asks us to pity him: "If it is a pity things should be as they are, it is also the way in this world they must be."

In its gentle, prosy cadences, its loose approximation of iambic pentameter, and its wistful absorption in a single ordinary human life, "Absent with Official Leave" anticipates many of Jarrell's better postwar poems. One such poem is "A Girl in a Library" (1951), in which the speaker sees a homely, vacuous-looking student, a standard cow-college type, about to drift off to sleep "in this enclave [where] there are centuries / For you to waste." He regards her scornfully, even heartlessly: "One sees in your blurred eyes / The 'uneasy half-soul' Kipling saw in dogs'." Yet his scorn is mixed with tenderness ("You are very human"), even empathy (for he realizes that he sees the same half-soul "in the glass, in one's own

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eyes"). As he imagines himself telling Tatyana Larina—the heroine of *Eugene Onegin*, who presumably represents, for Jarrell, a realm as distant as possible from the girl's tacky little world of blind dates and such—she is missing out on life, on imagination, on all the precious things of the spirit, without even knowing it:

> Poor senseless Life:
> When, in the last light sleep of dawn, the messenger
> Comes with his message, you will not awake.
> He'll give his feathery whistle, shake you hard,
> You'll look with wide eyes at the dewy yard
> And dream, with calm slow factuality:
> "Today's Commencement. My bachelor's degree
> In Home Ec., my doctorate of philosophy
> In Phys. Ed.
> [Tanya, they won't even *scan*]
> Are waiting for me . . . ."
> Oh, Tatyana,
> The Angel comes: better to squawk like a chicken
> Than to say with truth, "But I'm a *good* girl,"
> And Meet his Challenge with a last firm strange
> Uncomprehending smile; and—then, then!—see
> The blind date that has stood you up: your life.

As Pritchard notes, the poem mixes "mockery and love, satire and sympathy"—a paradox which is rehearsed in a very Jarrellian line toward the end of the poem: "I love you—and yet—and yet—I love you." It is not too much of an exaggeration, I think, to say that such combinations of satire and sentiment—wherein each takes the sting off the other, and the interplay helps generate a persona of plausible ambivalence—figure pivotally in many of Jarrell's better poems.

For many readers, to be sure, both the prosy style of "A Girl in a Library" and its concentration on a prosaic individual are far from salutary characteristics: to Dickey's mind, Jarrell's "romance with the ordinary" results in a poetry that is insufficiently "magical"; in Tate's view, Jarrell's lines were often too limp. Jarrell's reply to this charge was unequivocal: "I'd rather seem limp and prosaic than false or rhetorical, I want to be like speech." Indeed, in his mature poetry, Jarrell's ultimate criterion of excellence was authenticity; thus he berated Richard Wilbur for not being "real" enough, applauded Elizabeth Bishop for writing poems that "seem really about real life, and to have as much of what's nice and beautiful and loving about the world as the world lets them have," and preferred Philip Larkin to Dylan Thomas because the voice in Larkin's poetry was "like life." Though Jarrell claimed not to "put any real faith in abstractions," his poems are crowded with them, and life is at the top of the list; of the fifty poems in the *Selected Poems*, no fewer than five conclude with that very word. (Four of them, incidentally, end with the words *die*, *dies*, *dead*, and *death*.)

Yet life, in Jarrell's better postwar poems, is not at all an abstract thing. There may be mewling about life and death and fate, but it is likely to be done by a sympathetic, tangible speaker within the framework of an interior monologue. In place of the extreme, impersonal rhetoric of the war poems there are, in these poems, equally extreme assertions of personal despair; increasingly, as the years went by, Jarrell poured into his verse a profound anguish over the brevity of life, the passage of time, the horror of aging. In "The Face" (1950), a woman examines her countenance, no longer young and beautiful, and says "This isn't mine"; in "The Woman at the Washington Zoo" (1960), another woman roaming among the animals realizes that she is more truly caged than they, for she, unlike them, is trapped in the knowledge of aging and death; in "The Next Day" (1963), a third woman goes grocery shopping, her mind fixed on a friend's funeral the day before, "[c]onfused with my life, that is commonplace and solitary." And then there is "Aging" (1954):

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I wake, but before I know it is done,
The day, I sleep. And of days like these the years,
A life is made. I nod, consenting to my life.
. . . But who can live in these quick-passing hours?
I need to find again, to make a life,
A child's Sunday afternoon, the Pleasure Drive
Where everything went by but Time; the Study Hour
Spent at a desk, with folded hands, in waiting.

In those I could make. Did I not make in them
Myself? The Grown One whose time shortens,
Breath quickens, heart beats faster, till at last
It catches, skips . . . . Yet those hours that seemed, were endless
Were still not long enough to have remade
My childish heart: the heart that must have, always,
To make anything of anything, not time,
Not time but—
but, alas! eternity.

With its forthright expression of melancholy about adult life and mortality, its ready exaltation of childhood and its institutions, and its prominent, exclamatory *alas*, "Aging" is precisely the sort of Jarrell poem that is widely scorned as sentimental. Alas indeed! These are not good times for the reputation of a poet like Jarrell; one suspects that, in today's literary environment, readers may dismiss all these emotionally explicit later poems out of hand simply because their visible-feeling content exceeds current creative-writing-program recommendations. This is unfortunate, for "Aging," far from being emotionally self-indulgent, is actually very nicely controlled; and there are good things in many of the other poems of its ilk. Yet Dickey, in criticizing one of them, "The Lost Children," registers a valid complaint—namely, that Jarrell "does not search diligently enough for the thing that is his own beyond the thing that is owned both by him and by all those aging housewives." "Please do not understand me too quickly," wrote André Gide, and perhaps the major problem with these poems is that Jarrell populates them with characters who are rather too quickly understood, characters whose minds are a bit too easy for Jarrell's mind to encompass and comprehend. The problem with a poem like "Aging," in other words, is not that it is sentimental; it is that its speaker, while not quite a stereotype, lacks a certain dimension and ambiguity.

Yet there is something to be said for poems like "Aging," "The Next Day," and "The Woman at the Washington Zoo." The expression of despair in them is interestingly, peculiarly modulated; there is an alluring tension between form and content—between, that is to say, the inner torment of the speakers and the civilized regularity of the poems' quasi-pentameter lines. Lowell once described Jarrell's body as "a little ghostly in its immunity to soil, entanglements, and rebellion"; and the "body"—the form, the structure—of many a later Jarrell poem, for all its assertion of despair, likewise strikes one as being unnaturally aseptic and unentangled, possessed of an almost chilling false poise that cannot but make one think of the tranquil, imperturbable face that Jarrell himself showed to the world.

For despite the weighty existential agony that is communicated by these poems, Jarrell—if his friends, his family, and his own odd epistolary braggadocio are to be believed—went through life (until those troubled last months) with a smile on his face. Writing in 1945 to Margaret Marshall at *The Nation*, he explained that he had "an even, cheerful, and optimistic disposition: what I write is therapeutically the opposite, I guess." Pritchard comments: "My inclination is not to understand or 'accept' this split as an indication of a character at troubled odds with itself, but to take it rather as a measure of Jarrell's sanity. All of us, to one degree or another, look at life in these irreconcilable ways, even as, day by day, we entertain both of them and continue to

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function." Well, yes—most of us *do* experience both cheerfulness and anguish; but those of us who are emotionally healthy are able to face the anguish, to admit it to ourselves and others, and to work through it back to a more equable state. The disturbing thing about Jarrell is that he seems to have been as incapable of expressing despair outside of a poem as he was of introducing his cheerfulness convincingly into a poem. For this reason it is hard not to see his cheerfulness as, in large part, self-deceptive. Certainly his refusal to help in any way during Lowell's manic periods—or even to visit his friend in mental hospitals—suggests that he feared confronting in Lowell a reflection of what lay buried in himself.

More wholly satisfying than almost any of Jarrell's poems is his one novel, *Pictures from an Institution*; and Pritchard's discussion of it is among the most satisfying parts of his biography. Actually Jarrell himself called *Pictures* not a novel but a "comedy," and the distinction is worth keeping in mind, for this is not by any means a conventional novel; it is a book, Pritchard reminds us, "in which nothing happens except stylistically—within the sentences." As he shrewdly points out (and as its title suggests), Jarrell's comedy represents something of a mingling of genres: it has certain characteristics of both the dramatic poem and the essay; and its satirical depiction of the way art and culture are regarded in American colleges recalls both Jarrell's essay "The Obscurity of the Poet" and his poem "A Girl in a Library."

Pritchard is good on the book's intense, one-liner-heavy style, pointing out that its peculiarity "works against a sense of the book as real—as somehow about 'life'—in the way that *Anna Karenina* or even *The Groves of Academe* is real and about life"; and he is good, too, on the Jarrell-like narrator, whom Jarrell presents as "a clever, superior talent wanting also to insist that it wasn't *merely* clever, wasn't *really* superior in any exclusively elitist sense." Yet Pritchard's suggestion that *Pictures*, with its aversion to plot, should be seen as a forerunner of the "anti-stories" of Robert Coover, John Barth, and Donald Barthelme is not persuasive: Jarrell was anti-plot not because he wanted to play lexical self-referentiality games but because he wanted his book's texture and rhythms and voices to more closely resemble those of real life, at least as he saw it. (Whether he succeeded fully in this regard—and whether we would have wanted him to—is another matter.)

Though *Pictures* continues to win him new admirers, Jarrell is best known to many readers as a literary critic, the author of *Poetry and the Age* (1953) and three other collections of prose. If there are two basic kinds of poetry criticism—positive and negative—Jarrell was notorious for writing the latter kind, and for doing it with remarkable verve and panache. He describes Karl Shapiro's *Trial of a Poet* as "a sort of bobby-soxer's *Mauberley*," calls Frederic Prokosch "a sort of decerebrate Auden," says that "some of [Joyce] Kilmer's poems are better than 'Trees,' but not enough better for it to matter," and reviews Archibald MacLeish's "America Was Promises" by pretending that it is "a brilliant and malicious parody of MacLeish's public-speaking period." Pritchard, who contributed an essay to *The New York Times Book Review* a while back about "nasty reviewing," seems to look upon the writing of negative reviews more as a psychological phenomenon (what *makes* Mr. X so mean?) than as a necessary function of the serious critic. While giving some of Jarrell's funnier quips their due, he seems uncomfortable with Jarrell's negativeness; one gets the impression that, deep down, he looks upon a quickness to attack bad poetry as some sort of character flaw.

This is unfortunate, for Jarrell's unhesitating honesty in such matters is highly commendable. Implicit throughout his essays and correspondence is the idea that if poetry is genuinely important to you, and if you truly experience a poem with your whole self, then of course you'll be outraged by the publication of bad poetry, by the widespread neglect of good poetry, and by the inability

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of those around you to tell the difference. And if that is how you feel, then why pretend otherwise? What is the point of writing poetry criticism if not to communicate one's sincere response, and thereby to help separate the meritorious from the meretricious, and keep good work from drowning in a sea of mediocrity?

In this long, grim, theory-ridden twilight of what Jarrell called "The Age of Criticism," many literary critics would probably find Jarrell's view quaint, naïve; to their minds, writing criticism is part of what one does to get ahead—to get a teaching job, tenure, grant money—and writing nasty things about certain people might mean professional suicide. It wouldn't have occurred to Jarrell to think this way, for the need to speak his mind truthfully about the art he loved clearly meant more to him than any such practical considerations. Nor would he have understood the complaints of many new-wave critics that critical standards are by definition elitist (and therefore evil), or the objections from many poets that since poetry is an endangered species, poets should write only nice things about each other. (As if a universal complimentary-reviews-only policy would draw people to poetry rather than drive them away from it!) Far from being a black mark against him, Jarrell's willingness to write negative reviews, whatever the consequences, is one of the things that make him most worth remembering and honoring.

Pritchard seems more at ease discussing Jarrell's positive poetry criticism, much of which he thinks splendid. And it is true that Jarrell was, as Pritchard reminds us, very good at selecting first-rate, previously neglected passages from the oeuvres of poets like Frost and Whitman. But Jarrell doesn't usually do much with those passages; instead, he says such things as the following: "In the last lines of this quotation Whitman has reached—as great writers always reach—a point at which criticism seems not only unnecessary but absurd: these lines are so good that even admiration feels like insolence, and one is ashamed of anything that one can find to say about them." The reader can identify with Jarrell's position here: doubtless every literary critic has written about authors who impress him so much that he feels ridiculously audacious even to voice his approbation in print. But, for heaven's sake, this is the critic's job; for Jarrell to eschew it seems something of a cop-out. To be sure, the essay in question, "Some Lines from Whitman," is famous for having helped establish Whitman's central position in American poetry; but it did so by quoting splendid forgotten lines from *Leaves of Grass*, not by offering a convincing argument for the poet's greatness.

And what of Jarrell's position in American poetry? Though he was a wonderfully gifted writer, and though he wrote some of the most beautifully composed poems of his generation, he was far from a great poet. There is much in his *Selected Poems* that is deeply affecting and memorable. On the whole, however, one responds more enthusiastically to the idea of his poetry—his affection for the long, supple, meditative line, his preoccupation with the good and beautiful and innocent, and his desire to make everything (as he put it) "a thing of human importance"—than one does to most of the poems themselves.

Pritchard (who, to his credit, makes no vast claims for Jarrell's poetry) complains that Jarrell "learned almost nothing from his contemporaries"; a more magnanimous way to put this is to say that Jarrell was independent-minded—that his poetry, unlike that of many who work the assembly lines in today's creative-writing factories, was the genuine expression of the man. Yet the fact that so much of that poetry is ultimately rather disappointing would seem, ironically, to have more than a little to do with the man's own lamentable insufficiency of genuineness, his apparent reluctance—in poetry as well as in life—to confront and to grapple with whatever lay at the heart of his personal darkness.

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Poems *by Paul Mariani, Walter McDonald, Rachel Hadas & W. S. Di Piero*

Prelude

In the graygreen firs of the high Sierra Madres
the thundering multitude of monarchs, having navigated
on battered brilliant wings the moraines, bluffs,

the islands, inland seas and valleys,
the commons, pastures, towns, the choked Passaic,
the Onondaga & the Sound, having braved

the broad Chesapeake and the lower Mississippi,
the Alleghenies & the Allegash, the lush deltas
& the Okeechobee, the windwhipped Keys and the waters

of the yawning Gulf beyond, at last touch landfall,
settling by the millions in the sunsoaked mountain clearings
to begin their well-earned rest.

On my mother's peach gauze blouse, the one
I gave her as a present, we pin the simple
inlaid butterfly she loved to wear,

and fold her hands, right over left,
the unfamiliar rosary wrapped about them,
and place the asymmetric, brightwinged black

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& orange butterfly her grandson Lenny crayoned
upright beside her in the open casket . . .
For the first time, dismantling the crumbling carapace

of her room, I note her few possessions:
her nurse's uniform & her K-Mart shoes,
her dogeared AA bible and her cardboard trinket box.

And now, now that she is gone, even I,
who never learned to sing for her alive,
can see them settling everywhere: on walls and curtains,

on the backs of cherished photo albums,
on her ten-times-daily coffee cup, on her green brass
rusting bracelet, on so many scraps of Lenny's drawings:

those day-by-day reminders of the coming changes,
of the promise she saw lighting everywhere around her:
butterflies, butterflies, a million butterflies and more.

—*Paul Mariani*

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The digs in Escondido

In caves hacked out by tomahawks
we traded knives and arrowheads,
pieces of pottery and bones.
That far out in the country
no teachers prowled, no little brothers

tagging along and crying after dark.
White caliche crumbled when we dug,
hoping for treasure buried by tribes
a thousand years ago, shovels of gold
inches away. Now, nothing tumbles

down this canyon but scorpions,
a coyote starving for the moon,
stray dogs dumped by cars from town.
Years before diggers uncovered skulls of bison
and wolves and mammoths, we believed

this canyon on the plains hid ghosts.
Huddled around fires, spitting bitter tobacco,
we held up bones and argued what they were,
human or buffalo, turning them over and over.
We told the old lies faithfully after dark—

the one about the maiden no one ever found,
the ghost looking for his bloody arm,
the slaughtered wagon train—and heard a cry
in the night long after any human voice
could have made the sound.

—*Walter McDonald*

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On all roads going and coming

That girl in the album sharpened hoes
as if dead weeds could save her. That was my sister
when we were ten and seventeen. At night
she studied Greek, not even trying to resist
the tug of wings, somewhere to fly to from plains
so flat she wept. She studied maps like code.

Wherever her finger fell was magic. She grabbed
and shook me like a doll, demanded why our great-
grandparents crossed a prairie. Why
did they break down in wagons, trapped
between a dry caliche canyon and the Alps.
She stared at Army planes from the airfield,

all of them going somewhere, if only to war.
Now, she's off again somewhere. She's been
to Athens, reads six other tongues than Greek.
Her children left home one by one, flung wide
like Texas stars. She sold her title to the farm
and lives in town. After each trip,

she swears she'll let blue skies be empty.
Her garden sprawls while she's away,
but she won't let me touch it, won't hire
a yardman to save her weeds from scorn.
For days when she returns she rakes the leaves
and burns them, heaping them high.

—*Walter McDonald*

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In the hammock

Starting with fairy tales, we swing,
these hazy summer days, from heroes' feats
down through the intricate workings of a blood cell
and back to songs that mermaids sing.
Galaxies unimaginably vast
born where space and time curl up together
(or is it that they die there?)
become just one more story of the past.

Together you and I
scan the enormous tome we may be near
the end of, stubbornly
seeking in chaos evidence of choice:
black hole, lightning, dinosaur, virus—chosen!
Your guiding clue is mine, a mother's voice.

—Rachel Hadas

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Spring colds

Balance, he thinks, driving house
to house. *I'm minister to both,*
and how I love their need. One's cough,
fluttering up from narrow bones,
answers the other's ripped voice.
He loves entire and separately.

To his first she he carries easy
words and oranges. His other
gets tea, honey, and other words.
Sustained between that pair
of shattered breaths, he sits by each
familiar sickbed, serious places

from a better time. Eucalyptus drops,
grim syrups, kleenex shredded
under soaked pillows, the gentle
incoherence of illness he can reach,
maybe heal, in hours gorged
and slashed with faithful use.

—*W. S. Di Piero*

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Theater

Underdogs and underwear

by Donald Lyons

The Grapes of Wrath, now on stage at the Cort Theatre, is a virtuoso display of naturalism: a rickety Hudson is frantically packed by many hands and is seen to carry the dispossessed farmers from Oklahoma to California; people bathe in a river; changing hours of day and night are softly suggested. These fluid tableaux alternate with frozen tableaux: folks line up for a saying of grace or to contemplate with rapturous awe the first sight of the promised land of California. Kevin Rigdon's scenery and lighting show a craft in full bloom.

The play, as the oddly worded credits would have it, is "based on the novel by John Steinbeck, adapted and directed by Frank Galati." The production is by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company, and it breathes a spirit of earnest communalism: in the program, the players are listed alphabetically, and on the stage, a busy democracy of attention prevails—actors say their piece centerstage and scamper quickly upstage or offstage. There are genuflections toward "epic" theater in the nudging voice of the narrator and in the sporadic appearance—stage left—of balladeers, both of which underline the play's didactic points.

This strenuous egalitarianism does not obscure the excellence of certain individual performances. Both Lois Smith (Ma Joad) and Gary Sinise (Tom Joad) have found ways around even their worst lines: they impersonate energetic people bustling about and briskly, negligently, offhandedly mouthing the awful Steinbeck patter. They rattle through their populist arias, hitting "off" words as if thinking of something else—something *relevantly* else, to be sure, like their characters' dinner or night's sleep. Tall, handsome Lois Smith is able to infuse the private into the statuesque, the individual into the abstract in a way that blesses the text with more than it merits. (Miss Smith has once before wrung more than is there from a Steinbeck character. Remember the barmaid who was nice to James Dean in his mother's bordello in the 1955 film of Steinbeck's one decent book, *East of Eden*? It was she.)

The recent decision to dramatize Steinbeck's 1939 saga is not, of course, an innocent one. The Steppenwolf troupe clearly means to thrust a lesson upon us. In interviews, Mr. Sinise and Mr. Galati have cited the homeless visible near the Cort Theatre as honorary Okies, today's underdogs, living indictments of our society. It is therefore worth looking at the novel (the highlights of which have been naïvely transcribed to the stage) to see what we can in fact learn from it.

The Grapes of Wrath was one of the greatest popular literary successes of its decade, its chief rival being *Gone With the Wind*, that other piece of epic kitsch about the violent expropriation of an agricultural class. There are two voices in Steinbeck's novel, narrative and oral. The narrative voice, as Edmund Wilson pointed out in 1940, is watered

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Hemingway: "The sun lay on the grass and warmed it; and in the shade under the grass the insects moved," or "The spring is beautiful in California. Valleys in which the fruit blossoms are fragrant pink and white waters in a shallow sea." This style, for all its monotony, can rise to the specificity of poetry, as in this description of a hamburger stand that seems to anticipate the pop catalogues of *Lolita*:

> At one end of the counter a covered case; candy cough drops, caffeine sulphate called Sleepless, No-Doze; candy, cigarettes, razor blades, aspirin, Bromo-Seltzer, Alka-Seltzer. The walls decorated with posters, bathing girls, blondes with big breasts and slender hips and waxen faces, in white bathing suits, and holding a bottle of Coca-Cola and smiling—see what you get with Coca-Cola.

But mainly, indeed overwhelmingly, this voice is generic and soporific. Wilson remarked that it lacks Hemingway's "magic," and we assent to the cliché, adding that the source of the magic in Hemingway's early prose is a complex intuition of evil, an intuition beyond Steinbeck.

The novel's other voice, the oral one, is the voice of its people. With the exception of a few articulate heavies, every soul speaks the same regional "by-gum" idiom, rife with proverbs and rendered in doctored spelling. Speech is not individuated at all; indeed, Steinbeck's inability to create individuals is a scandal even to his admirers. But this homogenized folkspeak is not merely an incapacity of the author; it is, so to speak, his philosophy. He glories in it. His ex-preacher Casy, the oracle of the book, articulates its village pantheism thus: "I figgered, 'maybe it's all men an' women we love; maybe that's the Holy Sperit—the human sperit—the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of.'" This nervous hostility to religion that ushers in the book's pantheism (and that so delights the play's Broadway audience) strikes today a rather period note, as of a culture haunted by Puritanism; one thinks of O'Neill and, indeed, of Wilson. What Steinbeck replaces religion with—his new secular salve for the masses—seems to elude some commentators. The *New York Times* critic put it this way: "Without embracing either a jingoist's flag or a Marxist's ideology, he was simply trying to unearth and replenish the soul holding a country together . . . a communal soul that will save America from cruelty and selfishness when other gods, secular and religious, have failed." The diagnosis is clear: We are now in a new Dust Bowl of the spirit and need a shot of Dr. Steinbeck's elixir, whose label reads not MARXISM, oh no, but . . . COMMUNAL SOUL JUICE. Hmmm . . .

What, one wonders, does a work have to do to qualify as embracing Marxist ideology? Must its characters recite from tracts? In any case, even that requirement is met by Steinbeck's puppets. Tom Joad, radicalized by the labor-martyr Casy, vanishes into the underground with these famous words to his mother (mostly kept in the play): "I'll be all aroun' in the dark. I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever a cop's beatin' up a guy, I'll be there . . . . I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry an' they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there." (Note "build," not "own.") One sees here the limits of this make-believe pantheism. Tom Joad ain't gonna be there when a rich gal dives into her swimmin' pool. This is, in fact, not pantheism at all, but pop Stalinism, whose very keynote is a foggy, enveloping warmth toward correct objects coupled with rigid quantification of life and surveillance of the living. Read attentively, Tom seems more a menacing KGB bloc enforcer than a liberator.

The program includes a note on the production by Steinbeck's widow, in which she writes:

> Eleanor Roosevelt once told my husband and me that when she was in the Soviet Union she

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> was often asked if those disasters and tragedies to the land and its people which he had written about still prevailed. She said she always replied, "Oh no, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John Steinbeck have made sure of that." My husband turned to me and said quietly, "That's why I write."

This anecdote (the "always" is good) has the soft-focus, hallucinatory feel of a dream dimly recollected. Mere fact fades: was, for instance, Mrs. Roosevelt ever in the USSR during her husband's presidency? did she actually so refer to her husband? No matter: the story also has the veridical quality of a dream. *The Grapes of Wrath* does indeed silently appeal to a Soviet Union where no such agricultural injustice exists; it justly figures as a programmed accusation in the mouths of genocidal collectivizers and of apparatchiks presiding over manmade famines vastly dwarfing those of the Dust Bowl.

Changing tides of political correctness have, however, stranded *The Grapes of Wrath* upon the sandbar of sexism. Its women are assigned tasks of birthin' and buryin' and sucklin' and survivin' on the road and are denied, even in the ramshackle socialist paradise of Weed Patch Camp, any power beyond that of the ladle and the distaff. Earth-mother Ma Joad sums it up, in unintentionally funny words (retained in the play): "Man, he lives in jerk—baby born an' a man dies, an' that's a jerk—gets a farm an' loses his farm, an' that's a jerk. Woman, it's all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on." If Molly Bloom is having these days to answer charges of what one academic critic calls "the problems of the strong polarity of male as doer-actor, female as intuitive *genetrix*," poor Ma Joad had better just cop a plea.

Can one imagine an art form congenial to Steinbeckism? John Ford's movie of *The Grapes of Wrath* worked—to the limited extent that it did—not by the actors' incarnation of the story, but by the cinematographer Gregg Toland's creation of quasi-documentary pictures, images of rural suffering that recalled those of Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, and others. That is, the movie substituted strong photography for the novel's literary inadequacies; the lined faces on the screen implied lived lives that the book knows nothing of. But one might imagine monumental Thirties and Forties statuary as a condign concretization of the book's ethos: a huge Mother California Comforting the Spirit of Labor, in a pietà pose, on a headland in Malibu.

Thinking about the real Dust Bowl, I looked it up (inadequately, I admit) in a pocket encyclopedia. The entry listed "grasslands that had been plowed for wheat in the 1920s [and later] abandoned or returned to grazing" as among the Dust Bowl's chief causes, and "irrigation, regrassing, contour farming, and other conservation measures" as among the safeguards against its recurrence. Not a jot of this or any other humane, practical wisdom can be gathered from the inert and bloodless formulaic generalities of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. Its political nostrum, overt and covert, is disowned now even in the Soviet Motherland; indeed, it would make jejune fodder on any contemporary menu. Art's business is not to prescribe, but to open springs of humanity; some of the very topics and terrain *The Grapes of Wrath* so falsifies are alive in the bracing art of Willa Cather's 1918 georgic, *My Antonia*.

Like *Hamlet*'s inky cloak, Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* has a signature piece of apparel, seen early and kept visible—Maggie's "slip of ivory satin and lace." This slip, as worn by the beautifully shaped Kathleen Turner on playbills and posters and magazine covers, not to mention on stage, is the icon of the current revival at the Eugene O'Neill, more strikingly so than in past productions. It serves to remind us how much the American theater of the postwar decade was about underwear and the body.

The excitement of Broadway in those days—let us say from 1947, when *Streetcar* first appeared, to 1955, when *Cat* opened—was frankly sexual, from Stanley's T-shirt and

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"clinging wet polka dot drawers" to Maggie's slip. It was as if the war years had pent up a demand for the unbuttoning and unzippering of plays. In the 1930s, Odets's proles had been decently garbed in print dresses and plain shirts, while Philip Barry's aristos dressed formally; in the postwar years, the master stager Elia Kazan injected carnality into his work. True, his realization of *Death of a Salesman* spent its energies in largely nonsexual ways, but in Williams's plays—Kazan directed *Streetcar* and *Cat* and others—he found ideal vehicles for the voyeuristic display of charged bodies. Even a relatively demure Kazan-directed play like *Tea and Sympathy* ended with the leading lady unbuttoning her blouse. William Inge's plays, imitative ephemera of their era, also stressed their heroines' nubility and their heroes' shirtlessness. At the time, it was all quite scandalous, and even rebellious critics like Eric Bentley thundered against Broadway's new "cult of Priapus" and "phallus worship."

Now, in this revival of *Cat*, this frank physicality has lost any power to shock. It seems instead a given, an intriguing ingredient in the exotic Williams world, like poison in a Jacobean melodrama. It fits well into, and is indeed highlighted by, Howard Davies's schematic direction and by William Dudley's set, a Mississippi plantation bedroom roofed by the open sky and a huge willow, just as prescribed by Williams, who wrote, "[G]ive the actors room to move about freely (to show their restlessness, their passion for breaking out) as if it were a set for a ballet."

Act I consists of a wife and husband, Maggie and Brick, undressing and dressing, leaning longingly against doors in slip or towel, curling up in opposite chairs, and hurling the husband's crutch about. The blocking enacts the act's dynamic as vividly as the text—hot woman pursues cold man, who is crippled but armed with a crutch. Act II is also a duel with some crutch play, but mainly an emotional duel, as it is a father-son confrontation that climaxes in the facing of hidden truths. Act III ends with the coming together, in bed and in a mood of lassitude and blackmail, of the hot and greedy wife and the still coldish husband. These sexual positionings (Will she get him? No. No. Well, yeah, sort of . . .) give the play what structure it has; *Cat* is unimaginable clothed.

But it is precisely in the writing of the two central characters that the play crucially fails, and the intelligent efforts of the stars cannot conceal this failure. Kathleen Turner's kinetics are fun to watch—she *dances* her part lucidly, though she never seems particularly Southern—and Daniel Hugh Kelly brings passion to the much thinner role of the alcoholic, ex-jock husband. But the two characters are finally dim and unreal, for the febrile antics of Maggie and the sullen sloshings of Brick are traced back to their relationship with Brick's dead buddy, Skipper. This incredibly tangled tale is doled out largely in two lengthy monologues, one by Maggie at the end of the first act, the other by Brick at the end of the second. (Has it ever been stressed just how clumsy a pupil of Ibsen's Williams was? All those lumpish, expository, buried-secret orations! Think of Blanche's story of her doomed marriage to a homosexual.) As for the content of Maggie's and Brick's Skipper arias, it defies exposition, but goes something like this: Skipper loved Brick but not, Skipper thought, in a gay way, at least not until Maggie, wanting him out of the way, took him to bed where he couldn't perform, and so Skipper realized he *was* gay and telephoned Brick with the news, only to have Brick hang up, and so he killed himself, and so Brick got mad at Maggie for having soiled the one pure thing in his life, or maybe it wasn't so pure after all and maybe he (Brick) is gay, too, or . . . let's have another drink. The very center of the play sinks under this vertiginous nonsense. It is much too easy, by pointing to the so-called repressive temper of the 1950s, to exculpate Williams's own reluctance to treat homosexuality in a clear and open manner. The fact is, Williams liked these long, dreamy self-dramatizations and used them in contexts divorced from homo-

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sexuality and other controversies; their structure and content are strictly artistic, dramatic sins. At bottom, Williams had simply too little distance from the self-indulgent fantasizing of certain of his characters.

More solidly realized are Brick's parents, Big Daddy and Big Mama, a sadistic bully and a masochistic flibbertigibbet who are both rounded out in the course of the play by their suffering. (Williams not only gets away with these names, but generally succeeds in this play in evoking the loud rhythms of family life, its alternating abrasions and caresses. This is not *Long Day's Journey*, but it is lifelike.) Big Daddy is forced (in the second act, which he dominates) to confront the mess of Brick's life and to face his own impending death. This production uses Williams's original, and superior, third act, which, unlike the Kazan-inspired revision, keeps Big Daddy offstage; thus the third act belongs to the beaten-down Big Mama, who in it at last achieves some dignity. But even with these two characters Williams's touch falters, if never disastrously. Daddy just doesn't seem the product of a comprehensible past (a characteristic Williams weakness), and his dreary rantings about "mendacity," as well as his praise of "tolerance," seem inartistic impositions upon him by an author eager for a permissive parental mouthpiece. Mama, too, seems less than wholly plausible: her whining stupidities never quite jibe with her supposed bawdiness. Charles Durning delivers a brutal, unsentimentalized father, but throws away much of the role's humor. Polly Holliday, in the play's best performance, finds the humanity behind all the caricature in the mother.

Completely successful are the characters of Gooper and Mae (Kevin O'Rourke and Debra Jo Rupp), the rival son and scheming daughter-in-law who drool for Big Daddy's legacy of "twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile" and obnoxiously parade their brood of "no-neck monsters." They are, of course, one-note personages of almost pure comedy. It is, indeed, a familiar and valid generalization that Williams the comic writer triumphs while Williams the tragedian, the poetic meditator, falls short. This triumph holds not merely in minor characters like Gooper and Mae but in the comic aspects of such major characters as Big Daddy and Maggie here and Stanley and Blanche in *Streetcar*.

Williams at his best (that is, I suppose, in *Streetcar* and *Cat*) owned a mother lode of humor, racy insult, regional speech rhythm, and generally sassy observation of life. His is a talent hard to dislike, easy to laugh with, and easy also to get exasperated with when it gives in to habitual artistic vices. That it was a minor talent is clear when one sets it against the major (Mississippi) talent to whom Williams owed so much. Faulkner, especially in *The Sound and the Fury*, seems to have been the enabling power in Williams's background, although Faulkner achieved a breadth and authority in his field unmatched by Williams in his. And just as the weak Quentin section of *The Sound and the Fury* anticipates a deal of Williams's straining rhetoric, so the great Jason section, which gives raw voice to a certain Southern mentality, surely set the standard for Tennessee Williams. That section starts like this:

> Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say. I says you're lucky if her playing out of school is all that worries you. I says she ought to be down there in that kitchen right now, instead of up in her room, gobbing paint on her face and waiting for six niggers that cant even stand up out of a chair unless they've got a pan full of bread and meat to balance them, to fix breakfast for her.

One can hear Stanley Kowalski just around the corner.

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Art

Successes

by Jed Perl

An artist can never have too many ideas. But an artist who has a lot of ideas had better have an imagination that is large enough to give form to those ideas. The painter Leland Bell, who is sixty-seven, has always had plenty of ideas; he has a full-bodied imagination, too. It says nothing against Leland Bell to point out that he is an artist whose work and career have been led by his ideas. As a lecturer and teacher, he has been one of our most eloquent spokesmen for classical pictorial values. And a Bell painting—whether it's a self-portrait or a portrait or a figure composition—strikes us first as a conceptual tour de force: no other painter has such fertile ideas about how to wed a premodern view of pictorial completeness to a modern taste for abstract form.

It is not strange that over the years Bell's finest paintings have been the ones in which the ideas were relatively simple—simple enough to allow his imagination to carry them up to the heights. In the self-portraits, Bell's imagination blossomed. The *Standing Self-Portrait with Drums* (1980) is a great painting, and some of the portraits of family and friends are extraordinary. It is also not strange that when Bell has grappled with more complex structural ideas—generally in his figure compositions—his imagination has often lagged behind. Two compositional motifs—the *Butterfly* series, with three figures, man and wife and daughter, ranged around a table, and the *Morning* series, with a man and a woman and a cat that's just killed a bird—have preoccupied him for decades. In the past ten years these motifs have seemed to preoccupy him almost to the exclusion of all others. Yet I have often left the shows of *Butterfly* and *Morning* paintings with the feeling that, while no one could do this kind of simplified figure composition anywhere near as well as Leland Bell, even Bell didn't have the largeness of imagination to put over all the ideas.

I cast my reservations about the figure compositions in the past tense because something amazing has happened in the paintings that Bell exhibited at the Robert Schoelkopf Gallery in March. This artist who has stuck to his guns all these years has made the imaginative leap. All of a sudden, in three new paintings—*Butterfly Group* (1986-90) and two further versions of *Morning* (1988-89)—the ideas are realized. Bell is still dealing with the same subjects in rather the same way that he has for four decades: he's still using black outlines and flat color shapes. But in the *Butterfly Group* he has achieved, for the first time, a combination of weightiness and buoyancy. This painting is a masterpiece that ought to hang on a museum wall alongside one of the great Légers. What was tamped down and potential in Bell's work has come out—all the way out.

Three years ago, reviewing the Bell retrospective at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., I wrote in these pages, "Bell's figure compositions don't really deliver the goods." Bell's quantum leap can

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only be described as the sum of many small changes, no one of which on the face of it would seem to make the difference. The versions of the figure compositions that Bell painted five or ten years ago are like patterns for the current versions. The curving contour of an arm or the relation of two color planes reappears, virtually unchanged. There is this diagrammatic aspect to the Bell paintings; and it has been, in the past, what made them both so intellectually fascinating and so emotionally unsatisfactory. This time, though, Bell inhabits his structures; he animates them from within, so that the experience of the painting isn't just blocked out, but felt through.

There's a new ease in the way Bell handles the brush: this is part of it. The paint (it is acrylic) is thinner, so that the surfaces have an animation about them. The drawing has more point and vigor than heretofore. And the color, which in the past tended to be overly tonal, now includes many surprising fluorescent jolts. Taken together, these developments give Bell's work a new dramatic power, so that each element can function on two levels simultaneously: abstractly (as an event at a given point on the surface) and metaphorically (as the action of a figure in a space). Not that this isn't what Bell always intended. In the past, though, the abstract and representational meanings of a form tended to register serially, or as an "either/or" equation. And over the years, Bell tended, in an effort probably to get over the serial or "either/or" effect, to push the forms too far in a representational or abstract direction. The effortfulness tended to turn the figure compositions into arrangements of conceits: some forms were like little quotations from the abstractions of Arp or Mondrian; others were like shorthand versions of Titian or Rubens.

By finding the proper balance among all the elements, Bell has achieved emotional completeness. We flow through the sequence of forms into a simulacrum of movement. The brilliance of the flat colors (they tend to push forward) and the eloquence of the drawing (it tends to lock forms into the plane) are joined so as to create a sense of continuous movement (in the figures) and a sense of charged stillness (in the spaces between). Spatial locations are extremely specific—we register them as points on a plane. But because we experience the space between those points kinetically, the points end up by functioning, simultaneously, as planets in a fluid universe. The result, in the *Butterfly Group*, is a painting that breathes as no Bell painting has before, a painting that is both perfectly locked into the rectangle and perfectly porous. Oh, there are weak spots—the still life on the right side of the table is a bit perfunctory—but it hardly matters. For as Bell has loosened up his puzzle-like configurations, he has also given his iconically simplified figures a psychological legibility. There used to be something muffled about the players in these domestic dramas; they were Bell's pawns. He has now not so much released their emotions as sunk their emotions so deeply into the paintings as to allow the drama to reach us as the sum of the painting. The emotion affects us viscerally, in our response to the form. The implacable presence of the woman in the *Butterfly Group* is lodged in the very weight of her red figure: her psychological presentness is expressed through the presentness of the form.

Bell's show was beautiful from end to end. As one entered the gallery, one was greeted by four marvelous, nearly monochromatic self-portraits: they made a connection to triumphs past, and provided a foil to the orgy of color to come. Moving around the show, one found the major paintings balanced by smaller versions of the same subjects: everything had room enough, everything rang out. Standing in the back room, which contained the two great versions of *Morning*, and looking through the doorway at the *Butterfly Group*, I felt exhilarated in a way I can only recall feeling before in a room full of Légers or Hélions. This feeling has to do with the way one responds to a certain kind of distillation of figurative form. Standing there, it seemed right to thank not only the artist who had

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painted the paintings, but also the art dealer who had exhibited the artist for the past thirty years. Perhaps the only thing rarer than an artist like Leland Bell, who goes the distance, is a dealer like Robert Schoelkopf, who goes the distance with an artist. The Bell show is the most recent in a series of triumphant turns in contemporary careers that Schoelkopf has sponsored. In my mind, Bell's new work goes next to the work that Louisa Matthiasdottir and Gabriel Laderman have shown in this gallery in recent years. The series of still lifes that Matthiasdottir made in the 1980s are the purest examples of a classical utterance in easel painting that we have today. And the figure compositions that Laderman exhibited in 1986 are America's first original response to Balthus—the first compositions to move beyond Balthus's vision of French adolescence to a vision of American adulthood. The art gallery that has brought us Bell, Matthiasdottir, and Laderman has brought us as much as any American gallery ever has.

To those who worry whether artists of originality can feel expansive and grow in the midst of our current dreckathon, Bell's show comes as wonderful news. Bell has insisted on an unfashionable idea of painting, and he has insisted on it with such grace and force and lucidity that he has made it relevant. Bell has taught himself to paint better and better, and now he has gone over the top.

Anyone with even a tangential connection to the art world has some story about the day that he or she went to ten or fifteen galleries and saw nothing of interest. I will not be the one to cast doubt on those experiences—since I've had them myself, in spades. If you go to the galleries you know that the ratio of valuable work to work that's utterly without value is pretty scary (I include among the valuable work anything that seems authentic, even if I don't feel anything for it). I'm not sure, however, that the situation is quite so scary as it sometimes seems. I suspect that there's as much good work being done in New York City as there ever was. What has increased (geometrically) is the number of galleries showing bad art and the number of artists doing bad work: the process of sifting through it grows more tedious all the time. Nevertheless, we cheat ourselves if we don't sift through it, because every once in a while an engaging artist whom we're unfamiliar with appears, and if we're not there for those experiences, what is it all about?

When I saw Bruce Helander's show of collages at Carlo Lamagna in February I'd never heard of Helander before. (From the gallery I learn that he was born in 1947, studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, has shown in New York from time to time, and lives in Palm Beach, Florida.) I walked into the gallery cold, and Helander's collages did something to me—they had a rhythmic pulse and a quirkiness of incident that got under my skin. I do not know what Helander is capable of beyond that room full of collages, nor (for the moment) do I care. What is sure is that he has an eye, and some taste, and a flair for putting odd bits of stuff together.

Helander's collages are made of found materials, many of which seem to date from the 1920s and 1930s. There are fragments from the Sunday color comics, as well as torn pieces of maps and wallpapers and advertisements, much of it with lettering in foreign languages. This is a gently wacko array of elements that we know from the dean of American collagists, Joseph Cornell. Helander, though, doesn't moon over a particular collage element in the way Cornell does. Helander presents similar material in a less deliberate, less slowly paced manner. He introduces modern speed—something like the cinematic jump cut—into the world of surrealist nostalgia.

All of the works were vertical. Helander takes the viewer on the visual equivalent of a roller-coaster ride: the movement through each collage is curvy and unpredictable, a back and forth and over and under, with faster and slower passages and a lot of jerky little events. Elements push in from all sides, and your eye swerves around them. Or they push out toward you, and you seem to

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swerve around behind them. Helander keeps us on the move. He also has a color sense that pulls it all together. He orchestrates each of his collages into a harmony of reds or blues. And he gives the collages, over all, a paled-out yet aniline color that one associates with old-fashioned color newspaper supplements. Helander is a camp-it-up comedian, a shameless romantic, and an intelligent abstractionist: this is an unusual combination.

What the collages tell us—beyond the fact that this artist has a taste for odd, charming bits of lettering and imagery, and that he likes to offer us little peeks into lost worlds—I can't really say. No one collage stands out. Looking at the show, I didn't feel compelled to make notes on specific compositions. Writing about them now, I find myself sitting with two postcard reproductions of works from the show, both of which illustrate Helander's strengths. *Storm Showers* includes an umbrella, a bit of rain, an old-fashioned metal bathtub spritzing heavenward, a clown's face. *Private Passage* has fragments of maps, leaves, a house: clearly its subject is travel. What the reproductions don't show is Helander's delicate sense of color and texture. Helander follows the semi-conscious logic of an imagination nourished on Surrealism and Dadaism without overintellectualizing the results. He's cheerfully nostalgic. From the evidence of this small show, he's not on the level of Trevor Winkfield or the late Nicolas Moufarrege; but like them, he knows how to combine the absurdist fun of classic Surrealism with the best of the Sixties psychedelic mindset. He gave me something to look at and I had a good time.

Jacqueline Lima, who called her show at the Blue Mountain Gallery in February "Perspective as Symbolic Form," is one of a number of artists of the past twenty years who have given the age-old science of perspective a modernist coloration. Lima is an eccentric artist, and a not-always-satisfying one: her work can get gimmicky when she paints on spherical surfaces and then mounts them on wrought-iron stands. But there's always a winning intensity to her depictions of what I assume is her loft—a big space crammed with the baggage of the artist's life in all its grimy proliferation. I was particularly interested in one painting in the recent show: *Unholy Matrimony* uses an idiosyncratic perspective system to thrust a man and a woman into a scene out of a house of mirrors. Knowingly or not, Lima uses perspective for anti-naturalist effect: her efforts are part of an interesting and largely buried evolution out of Cubism.

Perspective was first used in fifteenth-century Italian painting as a tool of the naturalists: Masaccio used it, in coordination with a new, softly sculptural sense of form, to give his religious scenes immediacy and credibility. But by the time Uccello, a couple of decades later, was crying out, "Oh what a sweet thing this perspective is!" he spoke as an artist obsessed not with perspective as a tool of naturalism so much as with perspective as a tool of conceptual thought. Cubism, which was the West's great reconsideration of perspective, also turned out to have both its naturalistic and conceptual sides. Just as the strongest development from fifteenth-century perspective was toward naturalism (things seen), the strongest development from Cubism was toward a naturalism of materials (things seen: paint, canvas, color, brushstroke). And just as there was an underlying development from fifteenth-century perspective toward conceptualism (Piero, Uccello), there was an underlying development from Cubism toward conceptualism (de Chirico, early Morandi). Lima's work lies somewhere down the road of post-Cubist conceptualism.

Jacqueline Lima, who was born in 1949, came into the New York scene at the end of the Sixties, when interest in representational art was stronger than it had been in some years. This included painterly representation of a kind that had been encouraged by Hofmann's teachings and been popular in New York since the Fifties (Leland Bell fits in somewhere here); as well as a new interest in a tighter kind of realism, which often

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involved reconsideration of the value of traditional disciplines such as perspective and anatomy that had been rejected by the younger generation before World War II. Sharp-focus realism returned to serious painting in the work of Philip Pearlstein and Gabriel Laderman. While Pearlstein painted without recourse to perspective theory, the seemingly exaggerated recessions into space that he arrived at in his paintings raised old questions about the nature of perception. Laderman, meanwhile, made a conscious attempt in his still lifes and landscapes to incorporate the pre-one-point perspective ideas of Giotto, and the eccentric perspective ideas of (for example) Fouquet. Out of the work of Pearlstein and Laderman came, in the Seventies, work by younger artists, artists who seemed to give their naturalistic yearnings an anti-naturalistic and even surrealist turn. Richard Chiriani—who studied perspective with Laderman at Pratt—is nowadays the most visible of these younger artists (he used to be associated with the Tibor de Nagy Gallery and now shows at Robert Schoelkopf): in his best work the city and the countryside are presented as toy-like vistas, with each plane showing hard and clear. Arthur Kleinfelder (who also studied with Laderman) exhibited (at the First Street Gallery in the Seventies) some remarkable paintings in which the space is rendered in a warped, non-Euclidean manner . . . and then, unfortunately, Kleinfelder stopped showing, leaving his best painting, *Hyperbolic: Portrait of Doris*, as a vivid memory. Lima, who has shown consistently at the Blue Mountain Gallery, fits into this group of artists. Her connection to the older generation is through her studies at Brooklyn College, where Pearlstein taught for years, and where she took perspective with Joseph Groell, a brilliant and demanding teacher who is also a gifted painter of classicizing figure compositions (which he has almost never exhibited). I go on about this history at some length because it is so little known, and because Lima's work cannot really be appreciated except in relation to a history, a tradition.

The central question that Lima raises in her paintings is, How can an artist describe the roving eye of the viewer within the fixed universe of a painting? Some of the answers that Lima gives are a bit too clever and cutesy for my taste. When she paints on a sphere—where the artist's 360-degree view as she turns around the concavity of her room is transformed into a seamless convexity—I find the solution pat. If the only way to truly represent the artist's roving eye is by denying the two-dimensional nature of painting, then the price of verisimilitude is too high. Looking at Lima's spherical works—and at the canvases that are shaped like those orange-peel maps—I have the feeling that I'm witnessing some weird twist on Sixties process art. These gimmicks are unbecoming in an artist who clearly has an allegiance to painting. Yet something holds me even in Lima's failures: the methodical, ever-so-slightly grim way in which the artist works through the piled-up stuff that fills her studio.

Lima is a damn good artist: she paints with a clear, unprepossessing hand; she uses small, delicate brushstrokes that bespeak a respect for appearances; she doesn't slick everything up, the way a lot of our realists now do; and her color, which looks dull and brownish at first, turns out to have a lovely blue or violet cast to it. There's a gravity to Lima's work, and when she galvanizes herself to put that 360-degree vision of hers onto a flat rectangle, she can be a compelling artist.

Unholy Matrimony—her best yet—is a long horizontal painting (almost a double square) that shows the length of a studio room and contains a crowded work table, a coffee table, a woman reclining in a chair, and a man standing across the coffee table from the woman. Lima seems to have begun by looking at the floorboards, which run parallel to the sides of the painting and carry us to the back wall. She concentrated on one of those floorboards, allowed her eye to jump from foreground to background, then repeated the process with the next floorboard. She has created a fractious view, in which the coherence of foreground yields a

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background that is broken up into dozens of vertical shards. This is an exercise in willful eccentricity; but Lima is a painter who goes so deep into her eccentricities that what starts out as a nutty conceit ends by transcending strategy and approaching poetry. The figures aren't all that convincing—Lima doesn't quite know what to do with anatomy; but the refracted vision through which we see the man and the woman is unpredictable enough to tell us that things aren't as they should be in this relationship. In *Unholy Matrimony* Lima manages to be clear about matters that are unclear. As your eye moves toward the background, where things go out of focus, Lima's brush doesn't let you down. The message is calculated to disturb: there is no vanishing point, Lima is telling us, and the center will not hold.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

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Add one Caravaggio

by Creighton Gilbert

Caravaggio (1571-1610) plainly belongs to that small group of artists popularly regarded as the greatest, but he has joined more recently than his contemporaries Rembrandt and Velázquez. By "popularly" I mean in circles wide enough to encompass the casual museum-goer. As anecdotal evidence of his current status I offer the man in the National Gallery in Washington who asked a guard whether the museum had any Caravaggios, and his look of incredulous grievance when the guard shrugged his shoulders and politely referred him to the information desk. When visitors ask, as they nearly always do, "Where are the French Impressionists?," the guards can tell them; Caravaggio has not yet climbed to that stage. (The answer to the man's question is No, the National Gallery has no Caravaggios. One can normally see a single Caravaggio at the Metropolitan in New York and in some other cities' major museums, but one needs to go to such unexpected places as Kansas City, Fort Worth, and Hartford to see the most splendid of his paintings in America.)

As anecdotal evidence of the recentness of Caravaggio's "arrival," I offer Le Corbusier, whose 1935 tour of America, recorded in *When the Cathedrals Were White* (1937), included a lecture at Vassar College. While he was having a drink at the house of a faculty member afterward, a student told him she was studying Caravaggio, to his quite reasonable surprise. To be sure, Le Corbusier was an "outsider" in this context. His notion of Caravaggio's identity, like many people's, seems to have dwelt on the artist's bohemian or criminal biography, much as many people's image of Van Gogh centers on his severed ear. In fact, Le Corbusier had stumbled on a small scholarly avant-garde.

Agnes Rindge, the faculty hostess at Vassar, belonged to the same small group as Everett Austin, the director of the Wadsworth Atheneum who bought the first Caravaggio for an American museum in 1943. Today Austin is most often remembered for his sponsorship of contemporary art, most spectacularly the premiere of the Virgil Thomson-Gertrude Stein opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934). His and his group's avant-garde preferences in painting, however, were not very bold; they liked the more chic and approachable surrealists, like Pavel Tchelitchew, and related romantics like Eugene Berman. They perhaps showed more daring in their taste for the Baroque, a term which, in the Thirties, was just starting to enter middlebrow vocabulary as something other than a term of abuse. Previously, the Baroque had often been condemned for false rhetoric—taking "rhetoric" in both its theatrical and classicizing senses. In the case of artists like Caravaggio, the Baroque had also been condemned for much the same reasons that led to the rejection of Zola: such artists dealt with disagreeably low themes, it was said, and their naturalistic styles did not require great skill. For the Atheneum, quite against

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the prevailing fashion, Austin made many brilliant purchases of Baroque art, as well as of works by newly rediscovered artists of the same era, such as LeNain.

Austin, Rindge, and their friends were assisted in their probings of the Baroque and of Caravaggio by a single adventurous Fifty-seventh Street dealer, Kirke Askew, and by following the excited and intelligent magazine writings of a few European art historians, notably Roberto Longhi and, later, Denis Mahon. They were also aided at least as much by Walter Friedlaender, a Caravaggio specialist who, exiled from Germany in 1933, taught at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. Friedlaender's very original notion about Caravaggio, which was not published until 1955, was that his naturalism was the vehicle of a religious sensibility, one of greater strength and sincerity than that of his conventional contemporaries doing church work. The Hartford painting, a Saint Francis swooning, accorded very well with this approach, and in general Friedlaender's thesis made it possible to consider Caravaggio respectable in the same way Rembrandt is. Through readers of Friedlaender's book—still in paperback and without a rival until Howard Hibbard's *Caravaggio* appeared in 1982—this approach remains a major force in Caravaggio studies. The same aspect of the artist is seen in *John the Baptist* at Kansas City—which, in 1952, became the second American museum acquisition—but not in the third, the Metropolitan's *Four Musicians*, purchased in 1952-53. That work is typical of the small paintings Caravaggio did in his early twenties, which have especially fascinated recent taste, but are of a genre he soon abandoned. They are close-ups of youths playing cards, making music, or eating and drinking—scenes that seem to belong to the same tavern and street life as the one then lived by Caravaggio. Yet they are painted with a grandeur and monumentality that have made their references to real life as difficult to pin down as they have made them magnetic. It is their remarkable distinction to make use of allegory and classicism in such a way as to emphasize the heroic value of the ordinary and the vulgar.

For some twenty years after 1953, no more Caravaggios came to America. Unknown works by him did continue to be discovered, however—hardly surprising for an artist of rising fame, whose rising prices tend to draw hidden works from their hiding places. Museums in Italy, which benefited from the country's strengthening economy, legal bars to the exportation of national treasures, and intelligent and energetic curators, and the National Gallery of London, which had only the latter, were able to get them. And, in the 1970s, Cleveland and Detroit were able to acquire works by Caravaggio. It does not diminish the accomplishment of these American museums to observe that the condition of the paintings did not seem to be ideal and that their subject matter was not immediately evocative to modern consciousness.

In 1987, however, the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth bought an unquestioned masterpiece, one of the pictures of youths in a tavern, *The Card Sharps*. Of the early Caravaggios, it is the least allegorical and most dramatic, and its purchase was a great coup. The picture had been well known from old photographs, and was given significant treatment in all books on the artist, but had not been seen since 1900. As with many Caravaggios, there were many early copies of the picture, and from time to time in the intervening decades one of those would be brought forth with a claim to be the original. But they all faded rapidly until the Fort Worth painting appeared. Not only did it win the nod of every connoisseur, but—in a truly Holmesian moment—the removal of an old lining, i.e., a second reinforcing canvas glued to the back by a restorer long ago, revealed the stamp of Cardinal Del Monte, Caravaggio's best patron in those early years and the known owner of the original. It was an elegant confirmation of the judgment to which the Kimbell's director, Edmund Pillsbury, and many leading Caravaggio specialists had already committed themselves. The museum has since been generous—proud too, of

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course—in shipping its painting on loan to New York several times, and the approval of its genuineness and of its unique brilliance continues in full.

That sort of crescendo and excitement demanded an encore, and the Metropolitan offered it recently with a small exhibition called "A Caravaggio Rediscovered: 'The Lute Player.'"[1] It was installed with admirable modesty and sobriety, noted by many as a welcome relief from blockbusters. The crowds that packed the exhibition supported the claim that museums may not need blockbusters, just appropriate occasions for combining the temporary with the excellent. In one room were hung the new Caravaggio and four other closely related early works by the artist. It was an admirable installation for forming one's own opinion about how this new Caravaggio fits with the ones known before. In the other rooms the focus shifted to music; on view were handsome original instruments from around 1600 of the kinds seen in Caravaggio's pictures, and other artists' musical paintings and prints. The display of these items, and the Metropolitan's related symposium on Baroque music, seemed to mark a digression from the raison d'être of the project.

It was a considerable exaggeration for the Metropolitan to call this *Lute Player* a "rediscovery"; one may attribute that either to public relations or, more generously, to the need for a brief title for the exhibition. The museum's director, Philippe de Montebello, tells us more accurately in his foreword to the catalogue that "few" modern scholars have discussed the work, that it has been inaccessible, and that they have called it one of the copies of an undoubted Caravaggio in the Hermitage. Now, however, it is "beyond any doubt" that this painting is by him, recently published documentation having also established its provenance, or history of ownership.

Until recently, most specialists held the view that Caravaggio did not repeat himself; that is, he did not produce near duplicates of his paintings upon request by his patrons. (Denis Mahon was among the rare dissenters on this point.) The continuing inspection of second versions that, after brief hopes, invariably turned out *not* to be by Caravaggio, served only to reinforce this view. It has been challenged, however, by two recent developments. One is the rich new documentation of provenance already mentioned. While it has long been known that certain of Caravaggio's clients commissioned lesser artists to make copies of his paintings, the newly found documentation indicates that two patrons had, in several cases, two paintings by him of the same composition. It must be mentioned, however, that since these documents are mostly in inventories compiled after the patrons' deaths, the attributions they contain cannot be considered foolproof.

The other recent development has to do with cleaning and restoration. The notable instance seen in the show is *The Gypsy Fortune Teller*. Of the two canvases with this composition, one in the Louvre, the other in the Pinacoteca Capitolina in Rome, only the latter was shown, but it was much to the point since it was the one owned by Del Monte and the one that, until recently, was commonly regarded as the copy. Typifying current opinion, the catalogue observes that the painting's autograph status has been confirmed by the discovery of the same Del Monte seal on the back (that doesn't absolutely do it, however, because of the problem with posthumous inventories just noted) and by "the cleaning undertaken in 1984." Museums do not show the public works in what is called their "stripped state," where the genuinely surviving parts are, as the term connotes, naked and shameful. This is followed by "inpainting" and other cosmetic aids, which, it is argued, make the public more likely to respond favorably to

1 "A Caravaggio Rediscovered: 'The Lute Player'" was on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from February 9 to April 22, 1990. The catalogue essay was written by the exhibition's curator, Keith Christensen of the Metropolitan's Department of European Paintings.

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them. Thus in the Metropolitan's *Four Musicians*, which was hung in the same room, the vivid motif of the curling paper is new, as was made clear in a wall label several years ago. This detail was derived from an old copy or copies of the painting, and here in the original fills in what was a lost section. What results is sure to be attractive, if only because it documents a combination of the art of Caravaggio with the way his art seems to our eyes today. In that respect, it is analogous to temporarily successful forgeries. Past restorers expressed the certainty that they had at last done it right. Whether modern restorers have better reason for such a conviction is open to doubt.

As it happened, hundreds of art historians visited New York for the annual meeting of the College Art Association in mid-February, and at the Caravaggio exhibition one naturally encountered specialists. The majority opinion about the new Caravaggio was not favorable. That only means it doesn't look nice, not that it is inauthentic. Marked by cutting contour lines, it possesses a dry stiffness that is very different from the Leningrad version. Such conspicuous contours can sometimes result from one kind of poor preservation, the loss of top surface, which makes the underlying bones of the composition more emphatic. It can also be the product of "overcleaning," the result of a wish to make a picture more appealing by making the colors brighter. Whatever techniques were used on this *Lute Player*, it is immediately apparent that the painting has been restored. One fellow viewer, sharing the unhappy judgment of others about the picture, said it had looked better in the stripped state. What indeed looked very much better was the Leningrad version, whose beauty perhaps was brought out all the more by the comparison. It had not been cleaned at all, and its varnish was obviously dirty, but the circumstances seemed to induce a general reaction that this was quite all right, and that nothing should be done. That consensus may prove to be one of the more important results of the exhibition.

The new *Lute Player*, when X-rayed, showed that in an early state it had included a still life of fruit on the table, identical with that in the Leningrad version; this was painted out and an additional instrument substituted. The deduction was made that this new version is later, having been begun as a straight repetition of the Leningrad version, then modified. That is surely the simplest explanation. Yet another conclusion would follow if one were to assume that the new painting, in its early "fruit-on-the-table" state, was the original version, but that the patron, Del Monte, requested that the musical motif receive stronger emphasis. (Del Monte, a collector of musical instruments and an amateur guitarist, was apparently more fond of music than of painting; indeed, many of the canvases he owned are of little aesthetic value, and seem to have been purchased more as illustrations of his various interests than for their artistic merit.) In this scenario, when Caravaggio came to paint the later Leningrad version, he would have reverted to his preferred motif of a still life.

One attractive result of this alternative approach to the new *Lute Player* is that it allows one to consider the painting an early work and thus to view it less negatively. The painting's linearity links it to the Metropolitan's *Four Musicians*, which in this exhibition hung on its right. It also contrasts with the painting that hung on its left, the Leningrad *Lute Player*, a work which on this view represented a more mature assurance. Colleagues to whom I offered this view indeed all found that the new picture fitted an earlier moment better, both in stylistic terms and as a means for making the painting's awkward elements more understandable. In this case, too, the life situations of artist and patron would make it less likely that the work was a copy by somebody else. Del Monte seems not to have paid his young artist highly, and he was in any case not rich, at least not in comparison with other cardinals. Seen this way, the new *Lute Player* would constitute a rich record of the emergence of a great painter, itself surely something worth devoting an exhibition to.

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Music

The Cleveland at Carnegie

by Dana Mack

Few American music ensembles can boast a history as distinguished as the Cleveland Orchestra's. Throughout the seventy-two years of its existence it has maintained a standard of excellence that is the envy of much larger cities. Perhaps the best indication of the veneration in which this ensemble is held is the audience it attracted, as always, to Carnegie Hall for two performances in late February. In its concentration and appreciation, the audience seemed the very heart of music-loving New York.

But there was more to draw a serious audience than simply the reputation of the orchestra. A further enticement was the program, which offered not only familiar classics—the *Adagio* from Mahler's Symphony no. 10, Mozart's Symphony no. 41 (the *Jupiter*), and Brahms's Symphony no. 2—but also such rarities as the *Andante* in B minor from Schubert's unfinished Symphony no. 10, Arnold Schoenberg's Piano Concerto (1942), and Erich Korngold's Violin Concerto (1945).

Perhaps the Cleveland's greatest asset is its leadership. Strong musical direction is something of an anomaly in this age of the traveling conductor, and the Cleveland has seemed twice blessed in recent years by the work of two outstanding musicians, Christoph von Dohnányi and Vladimir Ashkenazy. Dohnányi, whose career was established in Europe (principally at the Hamburg State Opera), is now in his sixth season as the orchestra's music director, and he shows no signs of leaving. Ashkenazy, music director of both the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, has for the past three years also held the position of the Cleveland's principal guest conductor, and has recently recorded the Brahms Piano Quintet with the Cleveland Orchestra's string quartet.

At Carnegie Hall the orchestra members, even as they filled the stage before the performance, exuded dignified professionalism. To many readers this may seem unremarkable, but to this New Yorker it was extraordinary. The demoralization of our own Philharmonic musicians, in contrast, is fearfully palpable at their every appearance.

Indeed, the opening of the first evening's program, conducted by Dohnányi, clearly demonstrated the musical results of professional dedication and high morale. The Cleveland's performance of the Mahler *Adagio* was exquisite: the string playing was precise, its tone rivetingly mellow.

The Schubert *Andante* was also precisely rendered. This pensive movement, only recently transcribed from the composer's piano-score sketches by the German conductor and musicologist Peter Gülke, was problematic on first hearing: it seemed an artificial working-up of a musical scrap perhaps more worthy of study than of actual performance. Interesting as they are to hear, one may question the programming of such academic constructions, even when they

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rescue fragments by composers as great as Schubert, and even when, as by the Cleveland, they are interpreted delicately.

Not surprisingly, the highlight of the evening was Mozart's *Jupiter* Symphony. The interpretation, refined and wonderfully balanced, was a telling indication of how the orchestra really plays. There is no fudging Mozart; any lack of clarity in the musical line is immediately perceptible. Dohnányi went beyond mere accuracy to draw out the dramatic life of the work without the slightest suggestion of heaviness.

Unfortunately, this concert did have a low point—Mitsuko Uchida's vapid rendition of the Schoenberg Piano Concerto. It would doubtless be too simple to blame only Uchida's superficial approach for what must be described as a musically inadequate performance, but it was apparent from the opening phrase that she was after a sonority more appropriate to lightweight Shostakovich than to heavyweight Schoenberg. Contrapuntal line was all but obscured in Uchida's rendition of this remarkable twelve-tone work; indeed, the piece sounded—unbelievably—as if it consisted merely of unrelated rhythmic spurts of chromatic dissonance.

Dohnányi enjoys a well-deserved reputation for the authentic interpretation of modern music, especially the music of the Second Vienna School, and his interpretation of the concerto's orchestral accompaniment was both serious and subtle. It was surprising, then, that Uchida's sudden explosions at the keyboard were so poorly integrated into the orchestra's performance. One wonders why Dohnányi tolerated this mismatched collaboration in music that obviously means so much to him.

The question nags largely because the disappointments of the evening were so few; indeed, one left the hall eager to attend the second concert, under Vladimir Ashkenazy's direction. This program, consisting of Samuel Barber's *Medea's Meditation and Dance of Vengeance* (1955), the Korngold Violin Concerto, and Brahms's Second Symphony, was musically less demanding than the first, but it offered some surprising rewards.

Not the least among these was the assurance Ashkenazy displayed as a conductor of Brahms. Perhaps better known as a pianist than as a conductor, Ashkenazy has, in the former capacity, never displayed a great gift for German music. His strengths are the French and Russian schools. It goes without saying that on the podium he is not one of those immortal conductors, like Karajan, upon whom the music of Brahms seemed to descend as if it were a gift from the heavens. Ashkenazy's realization of the Second Symphony could not be called easy or masterly, yet he elicited from this work much of its inherent grace.

The Barber, which opened the program, gave Ashkenazy ample opportunity to display his technical gifts as a conductor: a clean beat and meticulous attention to instrumental color. Ashkenazy chose to slight some of the pathos and tension of the "Meditation" in the interest of smoothness of tone and melodic line; still, the "Dance" was completely faithful to Barber, and it came off powerfully.

The best moments of this evening, however, came during the spirited performance of the Korngold Violin Concerto, with concertmaster Daniel Majeske as soloist. One cannot deny that Korngold (1897-1956), the prolific Viennese émigré who virtually invented the recipe for Hollywood *Schmalz*, was a composer of great skill but little profundity; nor can one deny that his Violin Concerto borders dangerously on *Kitsch*. But what fun Majeske and the Cleveland had with it! They approached it with a combination of good humor and earnestness, briskly moving its repetitive melodies along. A certain rapport between soloist and orchestra was to have been expected—Majeske joined the Cleveland in 1955 and became its concertmaster in 1969—but on this evening the mutual responsiveness was not only musically satisfying, but, indeed, touching. Even more touching was Majeske's modest demeanor on stage after intermission, when he matter-of-factly resumed his chair in the orchestra.

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What remains to be said about the Cleveland Orchestra concerns the musical benefits of long-term collaboration. One must not underestimate the confidence of a music ensemble that presents itself, on tour, to a sophisticated public in the stripped-to-essentials manner of the Cleveland. The decision to feature the orchestra's concertmaster rather than a "big name" guest artist in a Saturday-night performance at Carnegie Hall is only the most salient example of the Cleveland's disarming lack of affectation.

Even more important is the degree to which its programming reflects the orchestra's consummate professionalism—its viability as an ensemble. When one considers the transparency of such music as the Mozart, Schoenberg, or Schubert, music which demands everything from all sections of the orchestra, one can appreciate the grit it takes to program this music back-to-back in the same concert.

In its seemingly effortless, certainly unself-conscious performance of significant music, the Cleveland Orchestra brings to mind another great music institution, the Vienna Philharmonic. The comparison was made first, I believe, by the Viennese critic Franz Endler, and it has been seized upon by the orchestra's publicists and, unfortunately, turned into a cliché. But it is a comparison that goes deeper than one might think.

Both orchestras hold an unassailably prestigious place in the life of their communities. Like the Vienna Philharmonic, the Cleveland Orchestra is the very center of musical activity and attention in its community; more than this, it is the city's most important representative abroad.

Remarkably like the much older Vienna Philharmonic, the Cleveland, through a succession of brilliant conductors, has demonstrated consistent devotion to the East Central European music tradition; this consistency in leadership, and the strong desire for continuity in performance, has attracted to the Cleveland those ensemble musicians most devoted to performing this music.

It is encouraging that this musical tradition can prove itself so healthy in a place quite removed geographically from its source. One might venture to surmise here that the memory of long-time music director George Szell, twenty years after his death, still exercises a special influence upon the Cleveland's musical self-image and the way the members of the orchestra perceive their endeavors. This perception, by the evidence of the Carnegie Hall concerts, seems to be one of music-making as a happy task.

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Books

Mencken vs. Mencken

by Terry Teachout

H. L. Mencken died in his sleep on January 29, 1956, having spent the preceding eight years in the ironic limbo of misery reserved for prolific writers who are deprived by massive strokes of the power to work with words. The lawyers embarked on the labyrinthine task of carving up his estate, and a year and a half later it was revealed that he had left behind an archive of private papers so monumental as to make Boswell look like a tight-lipped introvert. The Enoch Pratt Free Library of Baltimore, Mencken's home town, announced on July 13, 1957, that Mencken had left it a four-volume typescript called "My Life as Author and Editor"; a three-volume typescript called "Thirty-five Years of Newspaper Work"; and a five-volume diary. The New York Public Library received a collection of Mencken letters running into the thousands.

The noses of untenured academics throughout America began to twitch with eager anticipation at the thought of all that unsifted pay dirt. But the twitching stopped as soon as it became known that Mencken had severely restricted access to his papers. The letters were to remain sealed until 1971, the diary until 1981, and the autobiographical typescripts until 1991. Only Carl Bode of the University of Maryland subsequently decided to go ahead with the writing of what had long been needed: a scholarly life of Mencken. "What [Mencken] says in all those volumes," Bode concluded, "may modify if not upset a considerable number of conclusions. On the other hand, it may not. I decided to take the risk. My guess is that the far side of the moon is much like the side we already see."

Bode published *Mencken*, a well-meaning but somewhat sketchy one-volume biography, in 1969, following it in 1977 with *The New Mencken Letters*, a superbly edited volume based on the New York Public Library's previously sealed collection of Mencken letters. The second major cache of papers, the five-volume diary, was opened in due course by the Enoch Pratt Free Library on January 29, 1981. This time, however, there was no fanfare; Mencken had foreclosed it by pasting on the wooden boxes containing the five volumes of the diary a set of identical labels, each reading as follows:

> This diary is to be deposited by my Executors on the understanding that it is not to be put at the disposal of readers until twenty-five years after my death, and is then to be open only to students engaged in critical or historical investigation, approved after proper inquiry by the Chief Librarian.

At first, the only people allowed to examine the diary were established Mencken scholars; in order to read it, they had to sign an affidavit attesting that they would not "copy, quote, attribute, or paraphrase the contents of the Diary, or any part of [its] contents," without the permission of the library's Board of Trustees. In 1985, how-

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ever, the trustees asked the attorney general of Maryland whether or not they could legally publish the diary under the terms of Mencken's bequest. On October 4, 1985, the attorney general ruled that "the Library has a legal right to publish the diaries"; eleven months later, the trustees finally decided to proceed with publication and retained Charles A. Fecher, author of *Mencken: A Study of His Thought* (1978) and editor of *Menckeniana*, the Enoch Pratt Free Library's quarterly journal of Mencken studies, to edit the manuscript.

In another time, this announcement would have caused a tremendous stir. But academic and literary fashions had changed greatly since Carl Bode had written *Mencken*. It was no longer sufficient for Mencken to have been (in Edmund Wilson's words) "without question, since Poe, our greatest practicing literary journalist." It was now also necessary for him to have been politically correct—and that H. L. Mencken most certainly was not. "All government, in its essence," he wrote in 1922, "is a conspiracy against the superior man: its one permanent object is to oppress him and cripple him." This conviction led Mencken to become the most prominent journalistic opponent of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal; it caused him to lose favor with American intellectuals from the Thirties on; and it made him a non-person in the left-wing academic circles of the Eighties.

So Charles Fecher, without benefit of academic imprimatur, quietly set about the task of abridging and annotating the diary (which runs to about 2,100 pages in double-spaced typescript) for trade publication by Alfred A. Knopf, Mencken's longtime publisher. Meanwhile, rumors about the contents of the diary gradually began to seep out from the Mencken Room of the Enoch Pratt Free Library; I heard in the summer of 1987 that the reason the trustees had hesitated to publish the diary was that it was filled with anti-Semitic and racist statements. When review copies of *The Diary of H. L. Mencken* were sent out at the end of 1989, these rumors turned out to have contained a grain of truth.[1] The diary, which Fecher has edited with skill and intelligence, contains numerous references to Jews, several (though by no means all) unflattering and some suggesting that Mencken viewed Jews as a group with distaste; it also contains a few unfavorable remarks about blacks.

Fecher faced the issue squarely in his introduction: "Let it be said at once, clearly and unequivocally: Mencken was an anti-Semite." Accurate and appropriate qualifications followed immediately: "To be sure, he was not one in the sense that Hitler was, or such men as Richard Wagner or Houston Stewart Chamberlain. He would have defended the civil rights of Jews as promptly and vigorously as those of any other group . . . . he knew large numbers of Jewish people, and appears to have been on the most cordial terms with nearly all of them." Unfortunately, Fecher's remark about Mencken's anti-Semitism was stripped of all qualification and picked up by the wire services. Newspaper columnists found in the resulting stories the stuff of an easy day's work, and they promptly set about attacking Mencken with pompous zeal, grossly distorting both the overall contents of the diary they obviously had not read and the larger implications of a body of work with which they were just as obviously not familiar.

No one familiar with H. L. Mencken's writings could possibly have been surprised by the presence of ethnic and racial slurs in his diary. Mencken's complex and ambivalent feelings towards Jews are perfectly obvious to anyone who has read *Treatise on the Gods*, *Treatise on Right and Wrong*, the six volumes of *Prejudices*, and the published correspondence; in addition, his three volumes of autobiographical essays, *Happy Days*, *Newspaper Days*, and *Heathen Days* (recently reprinted by Dorset in an omnibus volume called *The Days of H. L. Mencken*), are full of the condescending racial attitudes to

1 *The Diary of H. L. Mencken*, edited by Charles A. Fecher; Knopf, 476 pages, $30.

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be expected of anyone born in Baltimore a mere fifteen years after the end of the Civil War.

A handful of people aware of and qualified to discuss Mencken's various prejudices wrote about them in the wake of the publication of *The Diary of H. L. Mencken*. Some of these discussions were all too typical of the unattractive depths to which literary criticism has lately sunk. Garry Wills, for example, writing in *The New Republic*, caricatured Mencken as a boorish, Nietzsche-worshipping racist in love with raw power. Others were less willing to throw an acknowledged American classic over the side in order to appease the sensitivity fascists. In a letter published in *The New York Review of Books*, a group of literary eminences including Louis Auchincloss, Ralph Ellison, John Kenneth Galbraith, Norman Mailer, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wrote to express their "dismay at the overreaction to the *Diary* of H. L. Mencken. The *Diary*," they noted,

> does indeed contain discourteous remarks about Jews and blacks. It also contains discourteous remarks about most races, nations and professions; in fact, Mencken's harshest words are directed at " 'the only pure Anglo-Saxons left in the United States' . . . a wretchedly dirty, shiftless, stupid and rascally people."

One particularly thoughtful and balanced appraisal of Mencken's *Diary* inspired a doctrinaire rebuttal of the utmost savagery. Jonathan Yardley, writing in *The Washington Post*, pointed out that "Mencken did have his disagreeable prejudices, but he was able to rise above them in ways no true bigot possibly could," concluding that "Mencken was a man of his times, and to judge him by the standards of our own is as unfair as it is self-righteous." Doris Grumbach responded on the *Post*'s op-ed page with a massively self-righteous column that, after totting up Mencken's record of ethnic insensitivity ("There are 24 racial labels, attributed stories and direct insults in the recently published diaries"), ended with the vile and unforgivable assertion, obviously aimed directly at Yardley, that "those who defend a writer such as H. L. Mencken must be said to possess an antisemitic sensibility themselves."

Doris Grumbach's assault on Mencken, Yardley, and a varied assortment of American writers "who portrayed Jews with some venom" (Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Willa Cather, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot were all hauled before Grumbach's one-woman drumhead court and sentenced to oblivion) contained no hint that Mencken's diary reveals far more about its author than the fact that he was, at worst, a rather mild social anti-Semite. In fact, much of *The Diary of H. L. Mencken* is fully as vivid as Mencken's best essays, and while Carl Bode was right to predict that the diary would not tell us anything "new" about Mencken, it adds considerable detail to the existing picture of his post-1930 life.

In editing the diary, Charles Fecher has emphasized sharply observed vignettes: Mencken, Willa Cather, and Alfred Knopf in a Carnegie Hall box, listening to Serge Koussevitzky conduct the Mahler Ninth Symphony ("I had always thought of La Cather as a musician, but she told me that she really knew very little about music, and thus preferred Ravel's obvious banalities to Mahler's very fine writing"); Mencken and T. S. Eliot chatting after a lecture at Johns Hopkins about the high cost of publishing little magazines ("I drank a quart of home-brew beer, and Eliot got down two Scotches. A dull evening"); Mencken cackling over Sinclair Lewis's receiving the Nobel Prize ("It was splendid news to me, for it was very bad news for all the professors"). If *The Diary of H. L. Mencken* is any indication, "My Life as Author and Editor" and "Thirty-five Years of Newspaper Work" will be an incomparably rich quarry for future Mencken biographers.

But Mencken was more than a well-placed observer of American literary life during the Twenties and Thirties. He was also a major

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figure in his own right, one who cannot be dropped into the memory hole without leaving a huge gap in the literary history of the United States. As a critic, Mencken wrote the first book about George Bernard Shaw ever published and was chiefly responsible for bringing Theodore Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis to the attention of American readers. As co-editor of *The Smart Set* and co-founder of *The American Mercury*, he published the early work of James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O'Neill, Sherwood Anderson, and countless other key figures of the modern movement. As an amateur philologist, he produced *The American Language*, still the classic study of the divergence of English and American idiom and vocabulary.

Nor was Mencken's influence restricted to literary matters. A libertarian in politics and an agnostic in religious matters, he was the leading American spokesman of his generation for the rationalist ideology that in his youth was still known as "liberalism," and he led the charge against the sterile Puritanism that dominated Prohibition-era American culture. As a popular philosopher, he wrote a striking and well-received trilogy of "treatises" on democracy, comparative religion, and the history of ethics. As a working reporter, he covered everything from the Scopes Monkey Trial to the 1948 presidential conventions, and his Monday Articles for *The Baltimore Sun* were the direct forerunners of the modern op-ed column.

Mencken's powerful appeal throughout the Twenties was rooted in his bottomless disdain for the genteel literary traditions of nineteenth-century America and the popular vulgarities of what he called the "booboisie." ("*Q.* If you find so much that is unworthy of reverence in the United States, then why do you live here? *A.* Why do men go to zoos?") Not surprisingly, his broad-brush iconoclasm was dismissed as irrelevant in the Thirties as American intellectuals became increasingly preoccupied with the search for a "usable past" and with the rough beauties of proletarian culture. Ironically, much of Mencken's work has finally passed the acid test of renewed relevance; with the emergence of the postwar conservative movement in America, Mencken's right-wing libertarianism, long thought hopelessly outdated, became a newly resurgent strain in American thought. Like it or not, the Mencken *Weltanschauung* is once again a political and intellectual force to be reckoned with, and it is not necessary to agree with Mencken's politics to be impressed with the strength of his ideas.

Looking back in 1940 on his career as a critic, Mencken told a correspondent: "Most of the other reviewers of my work have made the mistake of assuming that I am a sort of esthete. I am, of course, nothing of the sort. Esthetic problems interest me only mildly. I am predominantly a reviewer of ideas and the more squarely those ideas are based upon demonstrable facts the better I like them." Mencken took his own ideas with comparable seriousness, as his May 26, 1945, diary entry suggests:

> Large parts of [my writings] have dealt with transient and forgotten themes, and are now dead, but whenever I dip into them I am struck by the number of ideas that still seem more or less valid and significant today. I have thrown off, in my time, an enormous number of such ideas—possibly more than any other American writer of my time.

To examine these ideas is to realize the surprising extent to which they contradict each other. Ambiguity is not a quality one typically associates with the Sage of Baltimore. On the surface, Mencken is the most confident of writers, the one who most decisively gravitates toward the solid bourgeois pleasures of certainty; he is, as editorial writers like to say of themselves, often wrong but never in doubt. But his certainty is a theatrical illusion produced by the fabulous assurance of his prose style. In fact, it is the tug and tang of ambiguity that helps to make Mencken so compelling, both as author and as personality.

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REUNION DES MUSEES NATIONAUX

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Anyone reading H. L. Mencken for the first time is likely to be struck by the conflict between the infectious gusto of his temperament and the extreme, even truculent pessimism of his philosophical outlook. "Here," he writes in *Notes on Democracy*, "the irony that lies under all human aspiration shows itself: the quest for happiness, as usual, brings only *un*happiness in the end." But there is a jolting quality to the relish with which he voices such grim sentiments, a quality that goes far beyond the sense of liberation with which the stoic confronts the irreducible facts of life.

The pleasure Mencken took in staring into the abyss is the outer manifestation of a more profound antinomy. Mencken's scorn for "the uplift" is one of the most frequently sounded themes in his work. "I have little belief in human progress," he told a reporter in 1927. "The human race is incurably idiotic. It will never be happy." But the same man who rejected "the dreadful effect of moral endeavor" also subscribed to the crudest possible version of the idea of progress: the notion that science might yet redeem the world.

Throughout his work, Mencken places the scientist at the pinnacle of his personal pantheon, praising him as "one of the greatest and noblest of men . . . . he stands in the very front rank of the race." Much of Mencken's humor consists of loud jeering at those benighted members of the "booboisie" who opt for primitive faith over better living through chemistry. ("If a man, being ill of a pus appendix . . . submits willingly to a treatment involving balancing him on McBurney's spot and playing on vertebrae as on a concertina, then I am willing, for one, to believe that he is badly wanted in Heaven.") Significantly, Mencken's incessant attacks on religion, for all their wit, are scarcely more penetrating than the tedious carpings of the village atheist, and even at the height of World War II, the ultimate refutation of the bland optimism of the Victorians, his private correspondence still contains passages like these:

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> Perhaps curiously I am really an optimist—that is to say I believe in human progress—in the long run . . . .
>
> I am thus inclined to believe that the world is constantly growing better, at least on its more enlightened levels. Certainly a man who comes down with pneumonia and puts his trust in the new drugs is measurably better off than the old-timer who believed that prayer could help him. Every time the scientists take another fort from the theologians and politicians there is genuine human progress.

Mencken's acceptance of the inevitability of scientific progress sheds light on one of the most troubling aspects of his thought: his inability to come to terms with World War II. As *The Diary of H. L. Mencken* makes all too clear, Mencken devoutly believed that "Roosevelt II" manipulated America into entering the war solely in order to consolidate his personal power as a politician. He has virtually nothing to say in his diary about the war, though he has plenty to say, all of it contemptuous, about Roosevelt himself. ("He was the first American to penetrate to the real depths of vulgar stupidity. He never made the mistake of overestimating the intelligence of the American mob.") He makes no reference in his diary, his published writings, or his private correspondence to the Holocaust, and though the stroke that ended his career took place in 1948, it is unthinkable that he was not aware by that time of the precise details of the destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis.

Mencken's silence on the Holocaust has been interpreted by hostile critics as yet another manifestation of his anti-Semitism. But inability to grasp the darker implications of Nazism was common enough in the Thirties and after. As a battle-scarred survivor of the anti-German frenzy that gripped the United States between 1915 and 1920, Mencken must have found it particularly difficult to believe that the people whose culture he regarded as supremely enlightened were capable of installing and supporting a regime that brought about the slaughter of six million Jews; as a staunch believer in the gospel of science, he must have been deeply shaken, perhaps even to the point of denial, to have learned of the depraved ends to which the German scientific establishment was so readily turned by Hitler and his henchmen.

Not that Mencken should have been surprised by any manifestation of human depravity. He told Burton Rascoe in 1920: "I do not aspire to any doctrine of my own. Few doctrines seem to me to be worth fighting for . . . . My notion is that all the larger human problems are insoluble, and that life is quite meaningless—a spectacle without purpose or moral." It is difficult to reconcile the blank amorality of this statement with the deep-dyed conservatism of the Baltimore burgher who reveled in tradition (preferably German) and believed passionately that "the two greatest intellectual possessions of modern man are the idea of personal freedom and the idea of the limitation of government." But Mencken himself found no difficulty in posing as a nihilistic conservative, and his failure to recognize the incoherence of that position stands in the way of his being taken seriously as a political philosopher.

Mencken, to be sure, is a pungent critic of democracy—or, more precisely, of the dangers of the unrestrained populism to which direct democracy can lead. Few writers have made the case against the common man as bitingly, whether in his macabre accounts of democracy in action (Mencken's convention coverage for *The Baltimore Sun* is still the best journalistic writing of its kind) or in his theoretical discussions of the inherent flaws of democracy:

> There is only one honest impulse at the bottom of Puritanism, and that is the impulse to punish the man with a superior capacity for happiness—to bring him down to the miserable level of "good" men, *i.e.*, of stupid, cowardly and chronically unhappy men. And there is only one sound argument for democracy, and that is the argument that it is

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> a crime for any man to hold himself out as better than other men, and, above all, a most heinous offense for him to prove it.

But nowhere in his writings on politics does Mencken attempt to adumbrate a political system that would satisfy the test of legitimacy and safeguard "the idea of personal freedom and the idea of the limitation of government" without falling prey to the obvious perils of unrestrained democracy. Indeed, he is completely unwilling to admit that this failure is at all significant; *Notes on Democracy*, his most systematic discussion of the issue, ends with a trivializing repetition of his familiar watching-the-monkeys paean to the joys of life among the booboisie. ("I enjoy democracy immensely. It is incomparably idiotic, and hence incomparably amusing.") "It is easy to think about politics," Raymond Aron once remarked, "but on one condition: recognition of and submission to its rules." Mencken fails this test utterly.

By the same token, one need not accept René Wellek's exaggerated claim that Mencken "cannot survive as a literary critic" to see the truth in his final judgment on Mencken:

> We have Mencken in a nutshell when he says: "A horse-laugh is worth ten thousand syllogisms. It is not only more effective; it is also vastly more intelligent." It flattered and flatters an audience to feel superior to the "swinish multitude," the "herd," the "booboisie," the professors, politicians, clergymen, and sundry that Mencken professed to despise without the need of theorizing or even too much strenuous thinking.

There is, as Wellek suggests, something of the bully in Mencken. He was marvelous with the easy targets—and it should never be forgotten that many of the targets that now seem to us "easy" were in Mencken's day immensely powerful and dangerous, as his various skirmishes with the censors make clear. But in literature and politics alike, he characteristically steered clear of the targets that would not yield so readily to his *ad hominem* brawling, and his raucous rejection of "constructive criticism" ("I do not object to being denounced, but I can't abide being school-mastered, especially by men I regard as imbeciles") was simply an evasion of the critic's responsibility of working out an affirmative vision against which the failings of the objects of his criticism are to be measured.

All of this points to a fundamental inadequacy in Mencken's thought: a skepticism so extreme as to issue in philosophical unseriousness. Rendered incapable by his mechanistic skepticism of any genuine philosophical commitment, Mencken was left with nothing but a concept of "honor" as shallow as the Victorian idea of progress in which he believed so firmly. Though he was for the most part a genuinely honorable man, honor for Mencken would seem to have been little more than a higher species of etiquette. George Jean Nathan, who knew him better than most, wrote in 1917: "His moral code is from the Chinese and has but one item: keep your engagements." No more revealing thing has ever been said about H. L. Mencken.

If Mencken's contradictions help to make him immensely interesting, they also circumscribe him quite narrowly, and many critics have thus concluded that his work is of limited interest to modern readers. Edgar Kemler, Mencken's first postwar biographer, claimed as early as 1950 that "except for *The American Language*, the *Days* books, and a few selections" from his other books, Mencken "has produced no works likely to endure." Judging by *The Diary of H. L. Mencken*, Mencken himself might well have agreed:

> At the moment, with the Roosevelt crusade to save humanity in full blast, my ideas are so unpopular that it is impossible, as it was from 1915 to 1920, for me to print them. But when the New Deal imposture blows up at last, as it is sure to do soon or late, they may have a kind of revival. In 1920 I was able to press that

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> revival myself. That will be impossible this time, but the fact does not bother me, for in the long run every man has to shut down, and if he is remembered thereafter it is by the effort of others . . . . It is likely, of course, that no one will ever want to do so, but nothing can be done to change that implacable fact. In the end every man of my limited capacities must be forgotten utterly.

At no time in his life was H. L. Mencken guilty of false modesty, but it seems unlikely that he ever suspected he would someday be regarded as a modern classic. He saw himself as a journalist pure and simple; he turned his prose out by the ream, was always happy to submit to the attentions of line editors and fact-checkers, and exhibited none of the tics of the compulsively self-important "artist." Yet Mencken's journalism, written in haste and without pretensions, continues to give pleasure to countless readers; to read a volume of his letters is to make one positively gluttonous for another, even heftier volume, and virtually all of the essays included in the six series of *Prejudices*, which enshrine his reflections on everything from the literary offenses of Theodore Dreiser to the genius of Bach and Beethoven, have retained their freshness to this day.

Mencken's enduring appeal is in large part a function of his style. Edmund Wilson speaks of the "most attractive eighteenth-century qualities of lucidity, order and force" to be found in his prose; Mencken combined this matchless clarity with an unmistakably American tone of voice, and the result is a stylistic achievement of the first order. Look at the opening paragraph of *Happy Days*, a prime specimen of Mencken's firmly balanced prose rhythms and his racy, vigorous diction:

> At the instant I first became aware of the cosmos we all infest I was sitting in my mother's lap and blinking at a great burst of lights, some of them red and others green, but most of them only the bright yellow of flaring gas. The time: the evening of Thursday, September 13, 1883, which was the day after my third birthday. The place: a ledge outside the second-story front windows of my father's cigar factory at 368 Baltimore street, Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A., fenced off from space and disaster by a sign bearing the majestic legend: AUG. MENCKEN & BRO. The occasion: the third and last annual Summer Nights' Carnival of the Order of Orioles, a society that adjourned *sine die*, with a thumping deficit, the very next morning, and has since been forgotten by the whole human race.

Mencken, of course, is much more than a memorable stylist. Daniel Aaron speaks of "the great comic writer who as time passes will be remembered less for what he said than how he said it," but the fact remains that Mencken's charm is inseparable from his habits of thought. However perverse or excessive (or, in the case of his various racial, ethnic, and religious prejudices, occasionally ugly) his underlying ideas may be, they continue to retain much of their impelling force. Though he is, by his own confession, "far more an artist than a metaphysician," one cannot help but be impressed by the stubborn way in which Mencken the self-taught philosopher grapples, in his simplistic, take-no-prisoners way, with the permanent things: the limits of art, the rule of law, the meaning of life.

This is where the artist comes in. The ideas are familiar; their embodiment in prose is unique. One *encounters* H. L. Mencken himself, incessantly skeptical, amused and amusing, fearlessly self-contradictory, in every sentence he wrote. He is, beyond question, one of the great American essayists. Thirty-four years after his death, Mencken has not yet lost his sharp corners and jagged edges. But he still passes the Holden Caulfield test with flying colors: anyone untroubled by the endless scruples of "sensitivity" would most definitely want to call him up after reading, say, "A Girl from Red Lion, P.A." or "The Sahara of the Bozart." Much can—and should—be forgiven a man like that.

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Apocalypse now

Martin Amis London Fields. Harmony, 470 pages, $19.95

reviewed by Donna Rifkind

When Martin Amis published his fifth novel, *Money*, in 1984, ambition was written all over it. (Amis's previous novels were clever but generally undistinguished.) *Money*'s large cast of characters and crowded plot broadcast the author's determination to outdistance England's other youngish front-running novelists, perhaps the most visible of whom are A. N. Wilson and Julian Barnes. According to American critics, who prize ambition above all other qualities, Amis accomplished his goal. *Money* was hailed as a novel full of "comic verve" (James Atlas); as "brilliant and frightening" (Anthony Burgess); as "engaging and hilarious" (Jay McInerney). Amis was called an artist of Rabelaisian gifts for his feverish portrait of a modern society deformed by greed.

The hero of the novel, a grotesquely obese, alcoholic Englishman named John Self, is a director of trashy commercials who is putting together his first feature film. He lurches through a perpetually dark and tarted-up New York and a damp, limp London, making deals with such unsavory characters as Lorne Guyland (an aging movie star), Fielding Goodney (a young executive on the make), Butch Beausoleil (a not-so-innocent ingenue), and—surprise—a novelist called Martin Amis, who pops up now and again in a quiet, ineffectual way. ("Yes, he's clever," admits John Self, "and I wish I had his articulation, but I sussed him for a wimp, right from the start.")

Amis's subdued personality in *Money* is, of course, a sly joke: we know that he's the brains behind this whole operation, the source of the novel's noisy energy. When he isn't making coy cameos in the middle of the narrative, Amis is reminding you of his cleverness in a thousand other ways. The most remarkable thing about *Money*, in fact, is the relentlessness with which the author strives to call attention to himself. Everything in the novel is as inflated and blustering as Self himself. New York is not just dirty and corrupt, it's brimming with vice and misery, overflowing with "heat, money, sex and fever," "full of guys and dolls who bawl and holler and weep about bad luck all the hours there are." Self's girlfriend, Selina Street, is not just your ordinary depraved slut; she's got "Persian eyes, overnight bag, hot throat, omniscient underwear, scarred wrists, boudoir odours and, quite possibly, the odours of other men." Extravagance is Amis's hallmark; he salts his narrative with not one or two but countless wisecracks, just in case his cleverness has somehow slipped your mind: "Money is very versatile. You really have to give money credit for that." Or: "Morning came, and I got up . . . . That doesn't sound particularly interesting or difficult, does it? I bet you do it all the time."

Joking aside, Amis also tries to infuse *Money* with the seriousness of a cautionary tale. John Self is supposed to represent a new order of soulless brutes who admire cunning and worship money and are well on their way toward destroying civilized society. "I'm the new kind, the kind who has money but can never use it for anything but ugliness," Self brags. "I am made of—junk, I'm just junk." "My way is coming up in the world." But you don't have to be a social scientist to recognize that Amis's moral seriousness is nothing but a pose. *Money* is less an expression of Amis's outrage at the collapse of civilization than a celebration of his own cleverness in depicting it.

Which brings us to Amis's latest novel, *London Fields*. Long before the storm of publicity for the new novel broke, there were threatening rumbles from London, where the forty-year-old author lives and where the book was a bestseller last year. Then the usual gale warnings appeared: there was a fawning profile of the author in the February 4 edition of *The New York Times Mag-*

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azine and an early review by James Wolcott in *Vanity Fair*. In March, the tempest hit full force in *The New York Times Book Review*, with a full-page ad declaring Martin Amis to be "a literary star" and, according to *The Wall Street Journal*, "a stone solid genius."

If *Money* seemed on publication like an exercise in gross exaggeration, in comparison with *London Fields* it now appears as modest as a Barbara Pym novel. Set in 1999, on the brink of an apocalypse, the new novel enlarges upon many of *Money*'s themes. Once again we're in the heart of a crowded city (London), an inferno full of schemers and cheats, the most prominent of whom is a nasty bit of lowlife named Keith Talent. When not involved in petty crime, abusing his wife Kath in their squalid council flat, or sleeping with an international assortment of girlfriends, Keith wastes time at a pub called the Black Cross, dreaming of celebrity in the world of championship darts. Another figure often found slumming at the Black Cross is Guy Clinch, a wealthy, handsome, and very gullible representative of that endangered species known as the English upper class.

Keith and Guy are both entranced by the "potently, magically, uncontrollably attractive" figure of Nicola Six, an enigmatic seductress who can predict the future and who out-vamps even Selina Street. "She had the power of inspiring love, almost anywhere," Amis writes of his heroine.

> Forget about making strong men weep. Seven-stone pacifists shouldered their way through street riots to be home in case she called. Family men abandoned sick children to wait in the rain outside her flat. Semi-literate builders and bankers sent her sonnet sequences.

Lately, Nicola is preoccupied with the foreknowledge of her own murder, which is to take place after midnight on her next birthday—her thirty-fifth—on the dead-end street where she lives. She takes comfort in the fact that the planet itself is showing signs of imminent destruction: "she welcomed and applauded the death of just about anything. It was company. It meant you weren't quite alone . . . . The Death of the Planet. The Death of God. The death of love. It was company."

Just what, on the eve of the millennium, does the "Death of the Planet" entail? Amis never offers a straightforward description; he prefers to hover nervously on the edge, throwing out hints of imminent political, meteorological, physical, and moral destruction. A likely confrontation between the superpowers known as "the Crisis" is a source of vague general anxiety, as is the health of the American president's wife, who seems to be dying of cancer. An eclipse is predicted for November 5—Guy Fawkes Day—and the sun has lately been appearing suspiciously low on the horizon.

In addition, the ozone layer is in pieces; there are "gigawatt thunderstorms, multi-megaton hurricanes and billion-acre bush fires"; the water is poisoned; food is irradiated beyond recognition; violence and vandalism flourish; and always, unavoidably, there is the threat of impending nuclear war: "It takes all kinds to make a world," warns the book's narrator, an American novelist named Samson Young; "It takes only one kind to unmake it." Guy Clinch has persistent waking nightmares of the effects of a nuclear blast. In one of them, he imagines his opulent home being destroyed by "the heavensplitting vociferation of fission"; in another, out for a walk with his baby son Marmaduke, he sees the sun "right there at the end of the street like a nuclear detonation. And Guy knew that the sun shouldn't be doing this . . . ."

Not surprisingly, all this approaching doom is causing a lot of physical wear and tear. Keith Talent suffers from a "bad chest, his curry-torn digestive system, the itchings and burnings of his sedimentary venereal complaints, his darts elbow, his wall-eyed hangovers." Guy Clinch, afflicted with perpetual nausea, can't bring himself to eat. And Sam Young, who is in and out of the narrative just as Martin Amis kept popping up in *Money*, is dying of a mysterious wasting disease. Amis couldn't make it any more

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clear: everyone, everything, the environment, the entire planet, is sick nearly to death. As Sam describes a walk with Nicola: "Hand in hand and arm in arm we totter, through communal fantasy and sorrow, through London fields. We're the dead. Above, the sky has a pink tinge to it, the cunning opposite of health, like something bad, something high . . . ."

Against this rotting backdrop, a somewhat less significant drama is being played out—the drama of Nicola's eventual murder. She knows when and where it will take place, but she doesn't know who the murderer will be. Could it be the lovestruck, jealous Guy? Nicola has lured him into intimacy by pretending to need his help locating an imaginary childhood friend, a Cambodian girl who was sent back to Indochina just as a "superwar," "a new kind of conflict," was erupting in the area. Or will Nicola's killer be Keith, whom she entraps by offering him help with his darts career, and by supplying him with pornographic videos starring herself? Will it be Nicola's ex-lover, Mark Asprey, the insufferably successful British writer whose flat Sam Young is renting while Asprey pursues fresh triumphs in America?

Or perhaps, Amis suggests, the murderer will be Sam Young himself. As Sam explains at the beginning, he isn't actually inventing *London Fields*; he's only recording the action as he watches it unfold. The book, he says, is "not a whodunit. More a whydoit . . . . I think I am less a novelist than a queasy cleric, taking down the minutes of real life." Nicola gives Sam tips on what ought to happen next in the novel; he's writing *London Fields* with hopes of big money and a movie deal, but he depends on Nicola's ability—and her willingness—to tell him the future. As the novel progresses, he talks about his difficulties in planning the narrative, his anxiety that Nicola will refuse to cooperate, his writer's block. Will he decide to kill Nicola out of sheer artistic frustration?

A narrator who relies on one of his characters to write his story for him; atmospheric conditions that outdazzle the plot in dramatic effects: what exactly is going on here? Amis is using the popular tricks of metafiction to divert our attention away from his plot toward a series of Big Themes. Nicola and the others aren't characters so much as they are mediums through which the omniscient voice of Martin Amis can channel his opinions about the decay of civilization and its certain end in nuclear war. The narrator's voice, ostensibly Sam Young's, often adopts a preachy manner that no one could mistake for anything but Amis's own:

> We used to live and die without any sense of the planet getting older, of mother earth getting older, living and dying. We used to live outside history. But now we're all coterminous. We're inside history now all right, on its leading edge, with the wind ripping past our ears. Hard to love, when you're bracing yourself for impact. And maybe love can't bear it either, and flees all planets when they reach this condition, when they get to the end of their twentieth centuries.

While apocalyptic fantasies are certainly nothing new in modern literature, Amis's timing with this one could not possibly be worse. He can't of course be blamed for the vicissitudes of history, but, as we are reminded every day, it is nevertheless the case that the likelihood of a nuclear catastrophe is fainter now than it has been at any time in the last forty years. In fact, the progress of what *The New York Times* has cheerfully been calling the "Upheaval in the East" brings up the following interesting question: now that Cold War tensions have been rendered nearly obsolete, and the threat of the Bomb seems to be subsiding, what would happen to much of contemporary literature if that threat were removed entirely? Where would a writer such as Amis, who is half in love with sudden death, go for the suspense, the drama, the romance that the Bomb has lent his work? For Amis, who based an entire book of stories, *Einstein's Monsters* (1987), on the certainty of nuclear disaster, the aesthetic consequences would

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be dire. If you took away all the end-of-the-world melodrama in *London Fields*, you'd be left with little more than an outline.

The novel's murder plot—what there is of it—is nothing but a haphazard send-up of detective fiction, with liberal appropriations from Nabokov. In a scene where Keith bungles a robbery, he blames his ineptitude on having been up all night and having had "no breakfast, no bowel movement"; compare this with Humbert Humbert in Nabokov's best-known novel, who, writing of the night he stole Lolita from her summer camp and then slept with her, recalls that he was "unbathed, unshaven, and had had no bowel movement. My nerves were a-jangle." Amis doesn't even bother to make improvements on Nabokov, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, or any of his other predecessors. In fact, he seems barely interested in the murder story at all.

If the plot is insubstantial, the characters involved in it are practically nonexistent. Amis freely acknowledges that his characters are mere clichés; he observes that Nicola, who understands that men want to see "the female form shaped and framed, packaged and gift-wrapped, stylized, cartoonified," has obligingly stylized herself. But he tries to do the impossible with these cartoon figures: to make them live not as individual personalities but as allegorical figures. As a result, each is forced to pull too heavy a load of metaphorical weight.

Nicola, for instance, who has about as much life as an inflatable doll, represents death, the dead-end street, the black hole of eternity. She's the ultimate—see how clever!—femme fatale. Her favorite sexual activity is sodomy, because it involves "the place whence no babies came." If this isn't heavy-handed enough, Nicola's imaginary Cambodian friend is named Enola Gay, and the child she bears is called Little Boy. We naturally recognize these names long before Amis painstakingly spells it out for us: *Enola Gay* was the airplane that dropped the atom bomb, code-named Little Boy, on Hiroshima. And for anyone who still hasn't gotten it, Amis throws in one last precious detail: Nicola loves all manner of clothing—underwear, "theatrical costumes and disguises, the belts, the scarves, the hats"—but she doesn't approve of the bikini, at all.

As it should by now be abundantly clear, Amis is much more interested in finding clever ways to subvert his own narrative than in supplying readers with a representation of reality. He is more than aware of the limitations of subversion and, in fact, is happy to go on at length about those limitations. As only a true believer in subversion could, he is willing to subvert himself. For one thing, it would be hard to overlook the possibility that Amis's ironic portrait of Marmaduke, Guy Clinch's horrifically hyperactive baby son, is a self-portrait. Is not this terrible infant, who is ceaselessly intent on gouging out his father's eyes and damaging his genitals, a comic mirror of Amis *fils*, the *enfant terrible* who is trying so hard to outdo his own father, the now conventional, middle-aged Kingsley Amis?

Other subversions follow as the novel drifts toward its conclusion. The dreaded eclipse passes without incident, the ominous weather improves, "the Crisis" shows signs of easing, the President's wife recovers, and there are signs that life on earth will continue. Subversively, Sam Young feels free to criticize the shortcomings of his own characters: "The people in here, they're like London, they're like the streets of London, a long way from any shape I've tried to equip them with, strictly non-symmetrical, exactly lopsided—far from many things, and far from art." This confession is immediately recognizable as the kind of coy apology that intelligent writers use to deflect potential criticism. It is also by far the most genuine sentiment in the book.

In the end, all the noise about apocalypse in *London Fields* is merely an elaborate disguise for the author's failed enterprise, his book that strays so "far from art." Despite Amis's love of excess, the book has no exuberance, no sense of engagement; it reads as if it were a chore to write. It is undoubtedly a chore to read, distended with

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unnecessary repetitions ("In traffic, now, we are using up each other's time, each other's lives. We are using up each other's lives") and whole passages of near-nonsensical filler: "Even the rain was dark. She listened to it again. What was the point? What could the rain say but rain, rain, rain?" "Dead clouds made you hate your father. Dead clouds made love hard. They made you want and need it, though: love. They made you have to have it."

Amis's latest work challenges readers to acknowledge once again that, of all the bright young British novelists, he is the most ambitious of them all. Yet when an author's interest in himself comes across as the most prominent aspect of his work, it becomes difficult to take that work seriously. Amis's ambition has eclipsed his interest in the necessary aesthetic concerns that a big novel like this one must incorporate. No amount of pompous doomsaying about nuclear destruction can conceal the fact that Amis's new book is ill-conceived, sloppily executed, and rickety beyond repair. This would be true even if current events were not pointing to the fact that the only bomb being dropped around here is *London Fields*.

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Letters

David Smith

To the Editors:
It was very interesting to find Karen Wilkin's paper "David Smith: The Sculptor and His Drawings" in the March *New Criterion*. It has always seemed inexplicable that Smith's work should not be seen as a whole. He was very serious about his drawings and they were—certainly many of them—intensely personal. The vicissitudes of his life are reflected in them quite plainly. The spray paintings on canvas and the small ones on paper, done with paper cutouts, were made with great enthusiasm and many were closely related to the sculptures. He traveled about with supplies in his van—or his ancient Mercedes—and worked wherever he found himself.

I lived for some years with many of the drawings and paintings and I found that visitors usually took no interest in them. At that time Sam Wagstaff was at the museum in Hartford and he came in occasionally with young artists or members of his Ladies' Committee. The Smiths were usually ignored except when I was given ardent lectures on the virtues of Pop Art and the beauty of the Sculls' foyer, complete with stove draped in artificial vegetables. However, after several visits, Sam stood under one of the horizontal paintings—David hung these horizontally; I think now they are used vertically—and said, "You know, *as a painting*, this is rather good." From then on, *as a painting* has been a password here.

Also at that time the then director of the Fogg Museum sent Rosalind Krauss to see the Smith work. She announced firmly upon arrival that she would see the sculpture exclusively.

One would think it perfectly natural to appreciate the complete artist and to approach with utmost gravity any work he felt he must do. It was a great disappointment to David Smith that, in his case, no one ever did this. I think Sam Wagstaff hung the first show ever of the Smith drawings—for which David was obliged to pay for the framing. At the close of the show David said sadly, "Wouldn't you think they could have bought just one?"

Name withheld by request
Pomfret Center, CT

Stanley Lewis

To the Editors:
In an omnibus article, "Half a Dozen Contemporaries" (February 1990), Jed Perl includes a review of Stanley Lewis's recent show at the Bowery Gallery that compels a response.

"Exhibiting before a public that's familiar with the strengths of one's earlier work," Jed writes, "an artist can be liberated to take risks." But this artist can also "slough off, confident that the good old audience will give the nod to anything he does." Stanley is "running on empty—and asking people to come along for the ride anyway." He "still has his gift for surfaces," but the Bowery show was "hollow all the way through."

I am reminded of an allegation that used to be made against Picasso: the artist is a manipulator

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and scamp who passes off inferior work on an audience he deems susceptible. But what painter, under what conditions, would proceed from such a cynical motive? Jed offers no rationale other than his own imagining, no evidence other than his own reading of the works in Stanley's show. To anyone who knows Stanley and his work, as I do, the allegation is preposterous. It is also, of course, extremely insulting.

Note that the allegation is not made directly: Artists *in general* can "slough off"; Stanley *in particular* is "running on empty." Arguing by insinuation is, I am sorry to say, all too typical of this review.

Stanley is said to be part of the "serious crowd," made up of people who "go 'tsk, tsk' at the mention of Julian Schnabel or David Salle." As evidence, Stanley is said to have taught at the Kansas City Art Institute and to be a "frequent visitor" to the New York Studio School. Both schools uphold worthy values, but the "insularity and underdog self-consciousness of the serious crowd" result in "slob-art: it's self-righteous slob-art."

Again Jed argues by insinuation. Stanley is not directly accused of making slob-art, but it has been established by his "frequent" visits to the Studio School (he doesn't deny them, does he?) that he is in with the serious crowd. As to a definition of "slob-art," none is given. Apparently there are varieties of slob-art, plain and self-righteous, but if the term is a technical one no citation of a literature on the topic is given either. With an idea of what slob-art is, the reader could form his or her own opinion on the suitability of the term for Stanley's recent efforts, but then this realm of discourse is not one where the niceties of objective argument have application.

"I once heard a member of the serious crowd remark, 'Every time I go into my studio, I re-invent the wheel,'" the review continues. "Now, that's pretty rich. Maybe that's what Stanley Lewis thinks he's doing." His paintings are "heavy on existential struggle—or is it just the existential merry-go-round?" He is "confusing ideas with notions, inspiration with strategy."

At a time when every aspect of painting is open to question and doubt, the idea of continually starting over again from scratch is by no means uncommon or surprising. Is it an idea of Stanley's? I have no idea, and neither does Jed. Even if Jed made a case for the richness of re-inventing the wheel, which he does not, he says, "*Maybe* that's what Stanley Lewis thinks he's doing." Does he propose to hang a reputation with the rope of "maybe"?

It is Jed's opinion that Stanley has two notions, "the notion that there is an a priori importance to drawing from life," and "the notion that a painting should have a broken, agitated surface . . . . Lewis's two notions don't even really go together, except in a willfully artificial way . . . . Everything hangs on the facture, and the facture is a fiction."

What are the differences between ideas and notions, inspirations and strategies? Are notions vaguer than ideas? Are there strategies for provoking inspiration? Is there anything to this ideas-versus-notions business other than a desire to deprecate Stanley?

Let Stanley's "notions" be promoted to the status of "ideas," and let it be stated that painting a picture without having ideas is impossible. The issue is not whether a painter has ideas but whether those ideas are grasped and articulated in a conscious effort for realization. Is this not partly what "seriousness" in a painter consists of? Without meaning to, Jed lets a high compliment slip through the net of his condemnation. Stanley is serious; he has ideas—ideas Jed himself attributes to Giacometti and de Kooning. Then Jed pays another unintended compliment, one I think Stanley's work earns. The words "willfully artificial" can instructively be applied to Matisse, for example. As for "the facture is a fiction," it substitutes wordplay for thought. The making of all works of art involves fiction of one kind or another. Unless Jed means it is Stanley's facture that in some particular sense is a fiction, the phrase is a tautology.

The review ends with the statement that students who once admired Stanley's work were offended by the show. This left me shaking my head in dismay. The lowness of attributing to Stanley's students the view of his show Jed seeks to advance quite surpasses the want of measure in all that went before. And how unconvincing to anyone who knows at first hand, as I do, how students admire Stanley and revere his efforts, both as teacher and painter.

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Most troubling, however, is that Jed takes refuge in the convention of the impartial and distanced observer, using it as a shelter from which to more perfectly assail Stanley's good name, writing as though he has not known Stanley for years, socialized with him, written about his work glowingly in the past. In its icy sarcasm, its lordly dispensations of writ (disguised as repartee), its remoteness from the everyday, human world of colleagues who shake hands and agree together in all simplicity that they do the best they can, this review is deeply and disturbingly irresponsible.

Norman Turner
Staten Island, NY

Jed Perl replies:
Norman, Norman, why do you call me Jed? (We hardly know each other.) And why do you quote me, quote me, quote me? Do you really think your sophistic games will convince readers that I mean the opposite of what I say? Mr. Norman, if you have an opinion about Lewis—aside from lovin' him and reverin' him—why not state it? (I know, you're just doing the best you can.)

You're a pedant without an imagination; or is this just adolescent irony? I mean can you—no, not you Norm, the other yous, the readers—believe this: "Apparently there are varieties of slob-art, plain and self-righteous, but if the term is a technical one no citation of a literature on the topic is given either. With an idea of what slob-art is, the reader could form his or her own opinion on the suitability . . ." Help! It's a phrase (believe it or not, Norman Turner) that I thought up on my own. I used my imagination—you ought to know about that, you're an artist.

Heck, Mr. Norman, I said what I thought. And, no, I wouldn't call Matisse "willfully artificial," though I might call his work, in the Nice period, "blissfully artificial" or something like that. And, yes, when I said "the facture is a fiction" I actually meant it. (Why are you so pathological about jazzy writing?) But then how could somebody who doesn't see a difference between ideas and notions—I mean, really!—know what the hell I was talking about?

And what can we expect from somebody who has so little grip on reality that he'll compare Pablo Picasso's rep with Stanley Lewis's rep? I mean, Norm, Pablo is the most famous artist in the universe, with the possible exception of LeRoy Neiman; and Stanley Lewis's paintings are unknown even to most of the readership of *The New Criterion*, and that's got to be one of the très sophisticated readerships in the world.

But of course the bottom line is that you think critics should write agitprop for artists. (Maybe part of the background of your letter, Mr. Norman, is that some years ago I wrote an extremely mixed review of a show of yours in *Art in America*? Hmm . . .) And the bottom line beneath that bottom line is that you think that any time a critic gets emotional about art, it's personal. I guess you think that, Norm, because you don't get emotional about art. Well I do. And if you don't like that I discuss context—the fact that Sherrie Levine is one of the women at the Mary Boone Gallery, and what that means; or the fact that Stanley Lewis is connected to a certain crowd, and what that means—well, I'm sorry, Mr. Norm, that you're such a cold-fish formalist.

As for shaking hands, I happen to have run into Stanley Lewis at some big event a few weeks ago, and we shook hands and had a chat. I guess, Mr. Turner, that you're the disappointed, angry one . . . but I won't get into that, because I ain't no psychiatrist, ain't no doctor with an MD. ("Citation of a literature on the topic"? *Aretha Franklin's Greatest Hits.*)

Raymond Williams

To the Editors:
I have just noticed a foolish error in my article "Raymond Williams in Retrospect" (February 1990). It is true that Williams resigned from the Labour Party, but he did so not in protest against the Labour *defeat* but against the Labour *victory* at the General Election of 1966—on the ground that the victory had been achieved by Mr. Wilson's abandoning Labour principles.

Maurice Cowling
Peterhouse
Cambridge, England

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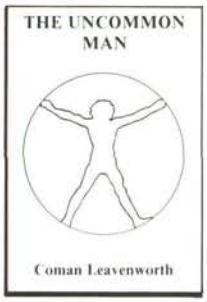

In each of us there is something of "the uncommon man." In a sense there is no such thing as "the common man," a term used by politicians to designate an imaginary group of identical nonentities.

But present-day science and technology and a Federal government that is at once overbearing and over-solicitous have between them subjected the society to markedly dehumanizing influences, and are progressively undermining, in each one of us, our uniqueness as individuals, our spirit of independence, our initiative, and whatever capacity for excellence we may have in us. In addition, they have caused many of us to become oblivious to certain vital, fundamental distinctions—between merit and mediocrity, the spiritual and the materialistic, beauty and ugliness—even between good and evil. The question prsents itself: Can anything be done about this societal disease, or is it terminal? In the opinion of the author the prognosis is not propitious.

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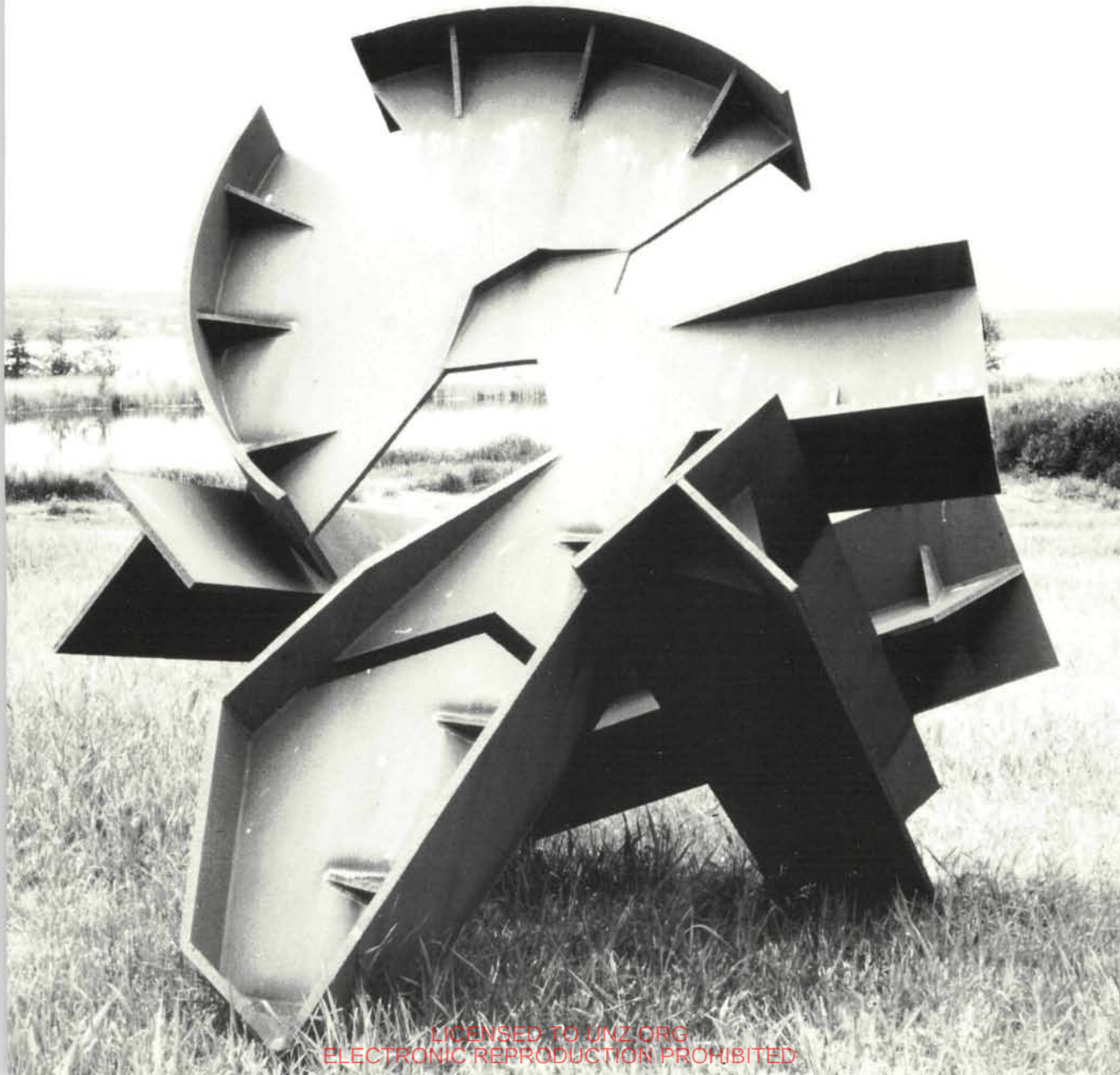

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